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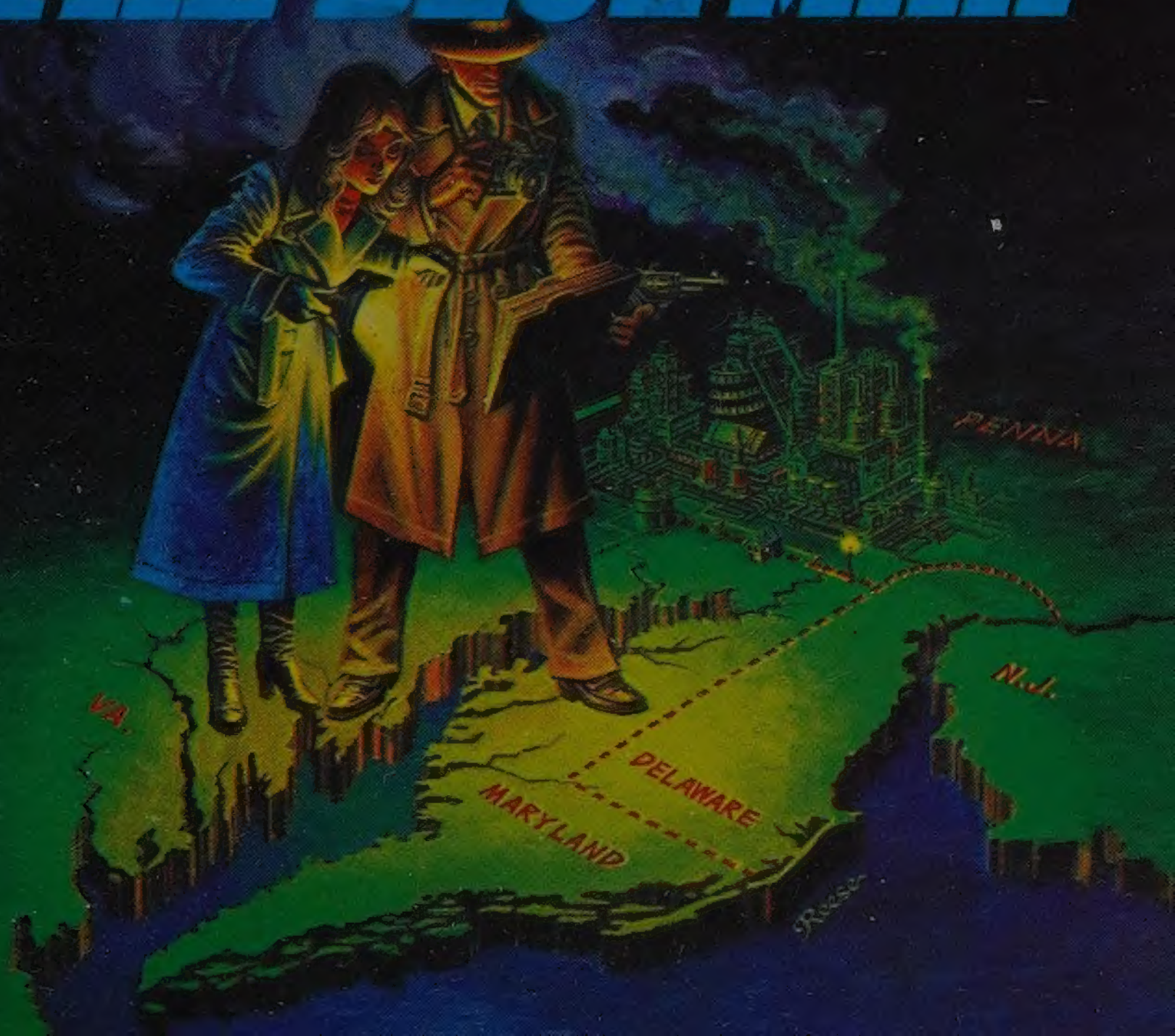
SPIES Inc.

A novel of
industrial espionage
in Pennsylvania, Delaware
and Maryland

Jack Hunter

author of

THE BLUE MAX



Hootenville, Pa.: It looks like any conventional company town . . . but beneath its placid surface is a throbbing network of violence, blackmail, and murder, linking strange bedfellows:

- **A dour plastics despot who rules his company town with an iron hand . . . and a calculating mind**
- **A playboy art director who frequents swinging brothels**
- **A love-spurned newspaper columnist with an ingenious plan for buying back his bride**
- **A shady call-girl partnership, comprised of a couple of men with secret missions**
- **A military P.R. man with a famous namesake and a dangerous scheme of international proportions**

It takes a sharp-humored ex-Army spy to coolly fit together the jigsaw puzzle, exposing—and nearly losing his life in—a game of terror, intrigue, and complicated cunning known as Industrial Espionage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JACK HUNTER was born in Hamilton, Ohio, and graduated from Penn State with a B.A. in Journalism. During his Army service he was sent to the War Department Intelligence Center and trained as a counterespionage agent. As a U.S. undercover agent in Germany in World War II, he directed "Operation Nursery," the lengthy Counter Intelligence effort credited with thwarting the only known organized plot to perpetuate the Nazi system after Hitler's downfall.

Mr. Hunter has been a radio news editor, a newspaper reporter, and, more recently, in public relations in the business and industrial fields. He has two major hobbies—aviation and the history of the German people. He is the author of **The Blue Max**, a subtly constructed novel of hair-raising action which explored the roots of the Nazi mentality. His experiences in counterespionage are revealed in **One of Us Works for Them**, and his second novel, **The Expendable Spy**.

SPIES, INC.

JACK D. HUNTER

b BARONET BOOKS • NEW YORK

To Tommy, Lee, Lyn, Jill, and J.D.
—who have taught me to base all
on Romans 8:28, 31.

SPIES, INC.

SPIES, INC.

A BARONET BOOK

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SPIES, INC.

CHAPTER 1

It was one of those days when the sky, sick and tired of February, gathers itself in sullen clumps and looses a spiteful spittle of snow at things in general. Since I was one of the local things in general, I had not escaped, and I paused inside the Administration Building's main entrance to slap my hat and flutter my coat and make a little fuss calculated to dramatize my annoyance with the meteorological rigors that had made me late for work.

Miss MacIntosh was not impressed. Peering at me over the tops of her high-fashion spectacles, she patted her blue hair and said in her all-knowing receptionist's voice, "There's a holler out for you, Mr. Dexter."

"Thank you, Miss MacIntosh. I'll see to it right away."

All institutions, from the Supreme Court to the

floating crap game, have their patois. In our particular splinter of that institution known as U.S. Industry, much of the idiom was traceable to the peculiarities of the company's president. For instance, a prime idiosyncrasy of this gentleman was his wont to summon underlings by direct address. Where most citizens would use the intercom or the phone or even a messenger to call somebody into the office, our chief executive would pronounce a surname in something between a gargle and an explosion, and it would fall to Miss Zacharias, his secretary, to push the button or dial the number of the luckless individual in demand. Since our president was Balsley Y. Hooten, spiritual leader and majority stockholder of the Hooten Plastics Corporation, such an alarum was known in office and plant alike as a Hooten holler.

It was a melancholy way to start a melancholy day, and Miss MacIntosh's icy amusement helped things not at all. She didn't like me much—mainly because she was a dedicated gossip and I had never played her game—and I suppose it pleased her to see me discomfitted in this way. I decided to put her in her place. "Call my office, will you? Tell Maudie to call Dom and tell him to get those layouts over here before ten."

I had hoped to find my tone crisp and imperious, like that of The Captain in a British sea movie, but Miss MacIntosh's answering sniff confirmed my suspicion that I had sounded more like a girls' gym teacher. Sighing silently, I hung my hat and coat on a guest rack and took to the stairs.

The corridor leading to the second-floor executive suite had always reminded me of a car on the Orient Express—a channel of gleaming metal and polished glass along which, steadying themselves

against the lurching set up by high-speed curves and clickety-clacking switchovers, should drift pasty-faced men with malevolent eyes and slouch hats.

Perhaps this induced the sense of impending doom I felt as I swung into the anteroom occupied by Miss Zacharias, a spindly type who wore glasses on her forehead, a pencil in her pompadour, and an expression akin to a missionary's when she sees a dirty word on the sidewalk.

"Good morning, Miss Zacharias. I hear there's a holler."

She gave me a look right in the chest and, to my surprise, I felt no ribs break. "He's been waiting, Mr. Dexter," she snapped. "And please don't use that word holler again. It's undignified and disrespectful."

I gave her an OCS salute and said, "Yes, sir."

"You may go in, Mr. Dexter," she said testily. "Right in."

Sighing again, I went right in.

It was a large office, brittle with daylight. At the far end, a wall-to-wall window displayed the plant at the bottom of the hill and, beyond the plant's steaming and chuffing, a swath of wintersullen southern Pennsylvania. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been a landscape to command soulful admiration—a thing of subtle hues and balanced forms that might have been done by Utrillo, had he turned out industrial murals for Madison Avenue. But these were no ordinary circumstances, because looming in the middle of things, his back to the view, stood Balsley Y. Hooten—tall, stooped, and taut—like *Tyrannosaurus rex* waiting for lunch to emerge from the underbrush.

"Good morning," I said, faking a smile and hating myself for it. I hate grovelers, and here I was, as obsequious as the headwaiter at a Mafia banquet. Seeking some self-respect, I added: "Crummy weather. I almost didn't make it to work."

He was no more impressed than Miss MacIntosh had been. "Where have you been, Dexter?" he croaked. "I've been waiting all morning for you."

This was hyperbole, of course, since it was now only six minutes past eight. But extravagant rhetoric is the prerogative of kings. "Sorry, sir," I groveled.

He waved a claw and said, "Sit."

I sat in a Danish modern something that resembled a spider in labor, and he stood for a time, his slitted yellow eyes regarding me with a kind of haughty detachment.

"I've noted that you don't take things very seriously, Dexter."

I was determined not to blush. "Well—"

"L. S. Drew has informed me that your performance is generally acceptable but your attitude leaves much to be desired. You are, he says, a smart aleck." His tone was neutral.

"I don't think that's altogether true, Mr. Hooten. I simply learned long ago that if I don't kid the world the world will make me cry."

He lowered an eyelid. "Absolute concentration. Unwavering attention to the ball and a fixed determination to stay on it. Work, work, work. No hesitating, no temporizing, no rationalizing, no emotionalism. Those are the things required of a man who wants to get ahead in the industrial world."

"Well, I suppose so, but—"

"The word but is the greatest rationalization of

all, young man." Hooten turned to the window and gave southern Pennsylvania a dirty look. After an interval he rumbled, "I understand you were once in the Army."

"That's right, sir."

"And that you were a spy or something."

"Well, no. Not exactly. I was a special agent in the Counter Intelligence Corps. That made me a counterspy, so to speak."

"You mean a spy who spies on spies?"

"So to speak."

He thought about this for a moment, seeming to listen to the sleet rattling against the high window. Then he glanced at me—a mere flicker of his alligator's eyes. "The Army is for fools and escapists, Dexter."

"It can be somewhat of a drag," I parried. "Everybody dressed alike and all."

"Then why did you join it?"

I found the audacity to shrug. "Well, there was this war kind of thing going, and I wasn't doing much that year, and my draft board had run out of fools and escapists, and one thing led to another, sort of."

"Personnel tells me you enlisted. You weren't drafted. You joined." He said this accusingly, as if I'd just pinched his wife's rump. This was disconcerting, of course, but not nearly as much so as the discovery that he had taken the trouble to check my records. Something was in the wind, all right.

"Well, you see, Mr. Hooten, I figured the best way to outwit my draft board was to join the Army. They couldn't touch me there, by golly."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you getting smart with me?"

"Just an old joke. No disrespect intended."

"I certainly hope not," he said severely. "I demand a lot of my men, but what I demand above all is respect." He waved a hand toward the plant below. "All that down there, all these buildings around us, are a direct result of my single-handed effort. When my father appointed me president at the age of twenty-two, the Hooten Corporation had three product lines and annual sales of eight million dollars. Today I have fourteen product lines, four plants, and sales of seventy million. A respectable achievement, Dexter. It is my achievement and I expect to be respected for it."

"And you are, sir. You're respected very widely," I said, deadpan.

He considered the weather again, rocking back and forth on his heels with his hands clasped behind his back. A full storm was blowing now, and large, aggressive snowflakes came barreling in to splatter against the window like Kamikaze butterflies. But I watched him, not the storm, feeling the old, old flutter. Balsley Hooten, single-handed achiever of respectable achievements, had called in an obscure community-relations assistant to ask about his Army career. Balsley Hooten had opened a bag, and the flutter told me I wouldn't rest easy until I had seen and fondled the very last snake inside.

"What did you do as a counterspy, Dexter? Lurk behind potted palms in your tuxedo and seduce women for their secrets?"

So. The bag was opening wider.

"Nothing so glamorous, I'm afraid. Counterintelligence is mainly ringing doorbells, asking questions, waiting, watching. Months of boredom separated by minutes of excitement. Don't believe what you read in the spy novels, Mr. Hooten."

He snorted. "I do not read novels, Dexter. I should think you'd have guessed as much. Novels are for fools and escapists."

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you do this kind of work?"

"In Munich. I was a member of the Ops Section of CIC Region Four when the Russkies declared the Cold War. I was there until the early fifties. I was a kid. But I was pretty good."

He glanced at me irritably. "For your information, Dexter, I can't abide braggarts."

"I didn't mean to sound as if I were bragging. The fact is, I was pretty good."

"Why did you join Hooten Plastics Corporation?"

This seemed to ring of the *non sequitur*, and I wondered briefly how I should answer the question. "Well, as my records show, Mr. Hooten, I'd tried professional soldiering after War Two and then I newspapered over a good bit of the country. Somewhere along the line I heard that industrial publications were becoming a big new branch of journalism and I decided to climb aboard. Hooten Plastics offered me a chance to establish a product-oriented external and it sounded good and so I took it and now we have *Plastimes* and if you'll excuse me for what might sound like bragging but isn't, it's one of the best magazines of its kind going."

Hooten peered at me from under his eyebrows and said, "For somebody who works with language you certainly talk like a klotz. All those ands strung together."

I didn't mention what stringing a lot of ands together had done for Hemingway.

He continued to study me, and it was no more

uncomfortable than sitting naked at a meeting of the Ladies Altar Guild. Eventually he made an announcement. "You disappoint me, Dexter. I'd hoped you'd tell me the truth."

"Truth? I did tell you the truth," I said, a bit sharply.

"As far as you went, I suppose. But you omitted the most significant facts. First fact: Your wife has threatened to leave you if you so much as hint that you expect her to move again; you've subjected your family to the lives of vagabonds, what with Army transfers from here to there and then leap-frogging from rented shack to rented shack in a long and hardly lucrative series of half-baked newspaper jobs. Second fact: You discovered after a bleak and protracted search in your forty-third year that Hooten Plastics Corporation is the only firm anywhere that would hire a job-hopper like you and that, although you despised the very idea of working with any organization more than six months, you took the Hooten offer to get your irate and disillusioned wife off your back."

Through the translucent redness that filmed my eyes, I thought I saw his mouth zigzag into a smile. But I couldn't be sure, because the shock and embarrassment were of the intensity that precludes acute perception. The thought: *My God, she's finally come to this.*

"You see? I know everything about all my people. And from them I've learned to expect evasions and rationalizations, halftruths and hedging. These are diseases common to those who lack the stuff to head their own businesses."

"Why did you call me in here, Mr. Hooten?" I think I said.

He answered with a question of his own: "What do you know about Yenom, Dexter?"

"Only what everybody's talking about, what I read in the newspapers and so on," I said, struggling to control the anger and humiliation. "It's a plastic of ours, very new and made secretly and exclusively for the Army. Despite our proprietary rights, some outfit in Baltimore—ah, Armbruster, I believe it is—has announced that it will market a product which, as I get it from everybody around here, is a direct copy."

Hooten regarded my necktie with detached disgust. "Precisely," he said. "The Armbruster Company has just announced via *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and the *Mushroom Grower's Gazette*, for all I know, that it will market something called Polykleer, a polystyrene that has all the qualities of a high-cost polycarbonate—high transparency and extreme toughness—with all the process advantages, as well as the low-cost factor, of plain glass. This Polykleer"—he pronounced the name as if he were clearing his mouth of a putrescent peach pit—"can only have been derived through a secret process recently developed by Hooten Plastics. Therefore, Armbruster has planted a spy among us."

Our company was a small one as things are reckoned in the chemical industry, and the suggestion that the premises might be host to a bona fide spy smacked of overkill—the kind of glut you would have if the KGB were to paradrop an agent under orders to penetrate the Penelope Hooten Chapter of the DAR. But I kept my face sincere and said, "That could be serious."

He waved an arm in a testy arc, and I thought of King Kong fistfighting the dive bombers. "Seri-

ous?" he exploded. "Catastrophic, that's what it could be. We spent nearly two million in Hooten research and development money to come up with Yenom, only to have those idiots in the Pentagon put a national security lid on it and snaffle up every ounce for Army use. And Armbruster, which has an R and D facility you could stuff into a Wheaties box, peeks over our shoulder and produces a casually disguised version of the product for exploitation on the open market—making the fat civilian dollar while we are forced to operate on a government contract basis. Serious, Dexter? Ye Gods."

"Any ideas on who might have passed the Yenom process to Armbruster?" I asked, striving for the proper tone of concern.

Hooten paused for a long interval, an air of speculation melding with his ill humor. Then he said, "A spy, that's who."

"Well, I mean, what kind of spy? There are lots of kinds."

"I thought you might tell me, Dexter."

"I? I don't know anything about it. I'm just a house organ editor."

"But a former counterspy."

"Well, yes, but—"

He leaned across the desk, peering at me in what I supposed to be a confidential manner. "I want you to do something for me, Dexter."

"What would that be, sir?" A sense of anxiety sought to dislodge my hard-won cool.

"I want you to do a special article for *Plastimes* magazine—maybe even a series of articles—stressing the need for tight security in all phases of our operations. You can use the theft of Yenom as your springboard—tell about how it has cost us

dearly and that sort of rot. You can interview all sorts of people, here in the Main Office, in R and D, at the plants, and ask what they are doing to keep their jobs safe from poachers. You know." He paused meaningfully.

"Sounds like a good idea," I said warily.

"And it occurred to me that while you are going about this you could use your counterspy talents to keep an eye out. There might be something said, or something unsaid, or there might be a few breaches of security control—things that the eye of a trained investigator might see that the eye of a businessman might not see. See?"

"Well—"

"I know nothing at all about spies, Dexter. You do. You might just possibly throw some light on the spy who has penetrated me."

I wanted to laugh in his face, but I thought of this month's oil bill and managed not to. I always think of my oil bills when I don't want to laugh. "Mr. Hooten, I haven't done that kind of work since Henry Kaiser had an automobile."

"A skill once learned is never forgotten, Dexter," he said with a kind of smugness. "I dare say I could still pluck out a fancy tune on the mandolin, for instance."

"But my God, sir—it's trying to eat stew with a straw. With Yenom, as with any product, there was a whole daisy chain of people who had to make the decisions: basic research and which area to concentrate on; when to begin the transition from lab to pilot plant; when and where to test market and which market to test; what production process to adopt and what alternatives there are, if any; when and how to commercialize; when and if to go into full-scale plant production; where the money's

coming from; who's got what patents and is there any likely infringement. Any one of all these people could have peddled the Yenom secret."

Hooten considered me with distaste. "Please don't lecture me on my own business, Dexter. I'm aware that there were many people involved. Besides, I'm not asking you to *find* the spy. I merely want you to do an article for the April *Plastimes*. While doing so I expect you to be observant. It's that simple."

I was becoming vastly irritated with the old Hooten-Nanny. "The April issue's all buttoned up. All stories are written, cleared by the departments and their customers, and ready for typography. We go to press on that issue in two weeks."

"Don't bother me with details. I want that article in the April issue of our company magazine. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 2

When I got to my office Dom was there, leaning over Maudie's desk and treating her to one of his let's-go-to-bed-together smiles. Dom was a son of Naples thrice removed, and the Latin tradition of romance around the clock had been passed down to him by a brace of forebears who, before the turn of the century, had sailed steerage for a lifetime of enthusiastic copulation in Philadelphia, of all places. Of the hundreds of handsome creatures spawned by this union, Dom was the brightest-eyed, straightest-toothed, most olive-skinned of them all and, armed with these assets, he had sought since puberty to service every unattached female between Independence Hall and the Washington Monument. He'd even become a commercial artist in the pursuit of this happiness, having learned that artists often spend their workdays in lofts with unclad and readily positioned woman-

kind. He was the ace of aces, Dom was, but Maudie had not fallen to his fire. In fact, Maudie, only twenty-three but impressively alert, had wisely avoided even the most cursory of dogfights with him. Dom, goaded by this inexplicable failure, salved his pride with sporadic strafing runs over Maudie's primly defended chastity.

"Pull up and climb for altitude, Dom," I sighed, coming through the door. "Baron von Dexter is on your tail."

Maudie, vastly relieved, peered around Dom's bulk and breathed, "Oh, Mr. Dexter—did you check out that holler?"

"Of course I did." I paused. "Didn't Miss Mac-Intosh call you?"

"Why, no," she said, standing up and giving Dom a look that ought to have knocked him across the room. "Was she supposed to?"

I could feel my cheeks redden under this additional and pettiest of humiliations. I said nothing. What was there to say?

"The layouts are on your desk," Dom boomed. He straightened his twenty-dollar tie and regarded me with a twinkling. His elegant face sobered, though, when he got a good look at mine. "Oy, boy," he said. "You all right?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Your face: it looks like a stoplight. Red, then yellow, now green."

"Clean living, regular hours."

Dom shook his head in deep concern. "I don't like the way you look."

"Few people do."

"Hooten must have given it to you good, eh?"

I hunched a shoulder. "Oh, we reminisced a bit about the war." I glanced at Maudie, who was

punching her hair into shape. "Run down and get me a coffee, will you?"

"One for me, too," Dom said, giving her a smile that could have won him a ten-year stretch for indecent assault. "I'll be in the office with Dex."

"No you won't," I said. "I've got a job. A special job."

"Well, hell," Dom said, spreading his arms in Neapolitan protest, "I just brought the layouts. Aren't we going over them, for cripes sake?"

I didn't want to look at him another minute. I didn't want to look at anybody another minute. "You like them, they're O.K. with me."

"Man, you are in a state of shock. You never put a layout to bed without you kiss it good night. Personal. In person."

"So long, Dom," I said, going into my cubicle. "Call me if you need me."

I sat there for a long time, staring out the gunport our building superintendent liked to call a window, awash in a return of my anger. In nearly two decades of marriage I had become passably familiar with the byways of my wife's personality. She was a rather uncomplicated creature, all in all, whose myopias were, in descending order, children, home, church, and antiques. (Husband fell roughly between home and church—with occasional consignment to a place below antiques, depending on the extent and nature of his misdemeanors.) She was, within this framework, decent and loyal and basically unselfish, and despite the fact that she was just about the best-looking woman I'd ever laid eyes on, she cared very little for any kind of limelight. Also, for all the unwavering naïveté with which she kept herself ignorant of the sweaty

world, she had always known instinctively when, where, and how to freeze—hushed and wary—as predatory talebearers prowled her environs. The night of my first day on the job at Hooten, for example, I told her of a lunchtime warning delivered to me by Andy Morris: “In this town there isn’t a cork pulled, a bet made, or a broad laid without the news reaching Balsley Hooten. You want to keep his nose out of your business? Then get the hell out of Pennsylvania and head for the sensible marble halls of Du Pont, or something.” Peg had merely sniffed, saying, “We need a *lawyer* to tell us that a company town is dangerous? Sheesh.” And she had continued to sort socks, the knowing in her eyes making it clear that her wifely radar had long since swept our new horizon.

How, then, could she possibly have told somebody who told somebody who told Balsley Hooten how it was with us? How could she possibly have confided to some goofy dame in a goofy housecoat and curlers that if I took another job in another town I’d be an instant bachelor?

Watching the snow, I reflected on the dreary evolution that leads marriage from the incandescence of the honeymoon to the grass fire of mutual disenchantment to the eventual char of negotiated toleration. I loved my wife very much and always had—a quaint admission for these psychedelic days, to be sure. But perhaps because of the times, or because I so thoroughly resented the increasing indifference with which Peg handled me, or because of the very fact that I was being handled, I had found myself of late becoming a rebel without claws.

Futile rebellion was nothing new to me, of course. When I considered all the youth currently

wrestling with a crisis of identity, I could realize I had been born twenty years too soon. I held the patent on such a crisis, actually, but instead of my elders' indulgent concern I had earned their contempt as some kind of nut. And, although my continued wrestling had given my wife nearly two decades of frustration and anxiety, I had reformed and become very older-generation in recent years—working from eight to five, paying my bills, controlling my abhorrence of routine, staying the hell home, and being sweet and lovable.

But, oh, dear God, was I bored.

And angry.

My thoughts, such as they were, sidled from Peg to Balsley Hooten per se. There had been something he had said this morning. Something fleeting but peculiarly important. A discord. A remark, or part of a remark, which of itself had been singularly inconsistent. In the hope that it might purge my mind of the resentment, I went over my conversation with Hooten again, searching for that false tone, that single note of a glissando that had, in a blink of time, been jarringly out of register. But I remembered it like I made my first million.

To hell with it. I had enough to worry about as it was.

So I worried.

And thought about everything and nothing.

And somewhere in it all, thought again about Art Logue.

I gave in to the masochistic urge and unlocked my lower desk drawer and withdrew his letter. Art was the publications manager of Conklin Industries, one of the really big ones that recently had moved its corporate headquarters to a site just over the Delaware line near Wilmington. As such,

Art dragged down twenty-five thousand a year riding shotgun on some first-rate periodicals—a big, glossy external, a busy and colorful company-wide internal, and a string of tabloid employee newspapers published at each of Conklin's thirty-one plant locations in eleven states and abroad.

Dear Dex:

It was certainly good to see you at the Industrial Editors' Annual Conference in Philly the other day. Lots of fun, lots of good sense made by a lot of good guys.

I was especially pleased to meet you at long last and to trade viewpoints. I've been watching your magazine and, as I told you at the Warwick, I've been anxious to see the face of the man who demonstrates so much talent and such a fine sense of the proper in a field that can be so very tricky and demanding.

I'd like to talk to you some more. As you know, we have a lot of things going here at Conklin and I think you might be interested in at least one of them. In a professional way, I mean. Because of its personal flavor, I've taken the liberty of sending this note to your home address. I hope you don't mind.

Would you be kind enough to meet me for lunch in Wilmington—say the Green Room at noon on March 1? If you can't, just drop me a line here at the office. If I don't hear from you sooner, I'll expect you there. O.K.?

Cordially,
Arthur M. Logue
Publications Manager

I hadn't shown the letter to Peg, naturally. It was the opening gambit in the weird chess game industry plays when recruiting. A job was open somewhere in the international complex of Conklin Industries, and I was the candidate. Even naïve Peg would have been able to see that.

I read the letter three times, and each time my depression grew deeper.

Conklin Industries. One of the best of the best.

Hooten Plastics. One of the worst of the worst.

And I was trapped.

Trapped by a nut who wanted to play I Spy, You Spy, We All Spy. Trapped by a wife who'd rather eat an arsenic sundae than look at one more moving van. Trapped by a shoddy past of my own that had made the wife what she was.

Ah, me.

I granted myself another sigh and wondered where Maudie was with the coffee. Deciding I couldn't wait, I locked away the Logue letter, stood up, stretched, and then toddled off to the cafeteria.

Andy Morris was sitting at one of the corner tables, sipping at a steaming cup and watching the blizzard with great disapproval, as if it were irrelevant, immaterial, and in violation of Section 2, Paragraph 3-A, of the Pennsylvania Criminal Code. He happened to see me, though, and waved me over.

"Good morning, you ink-stained wretch," he said. "Sit."

I sat down and nodded my head toward the storm. "There'll be a lot of shoveling in the old town tonight. Mind if I borrow Gary, boy snowplow operator?"

"It's O.K. with me. It'll cost you, though. Gary's saving up for a surfboard."

He smiled at me in that easy, bald-headed way of his, and I was glad I had stumbled on him at this particular point in time. Andy was a neighbor, so to speak. He and his clan occupied a big white clapboard thing with lots of porches and gables four blocks from our place in the Mapledale section of town. He was a pretty good lawyer, scuttlebutt had it, and as such served as Hooten's general counsel and specialist in patents. But all that aside, I'd had the opportunity to work with him on a couple of magazine articles and I had found him to be refreshingly aware of the value of industrial publications and the peculiar problems their production involved. He had actually made an impromptu little speech at a staff meeting one day, ticking off statistics and citing surveys that documented the wisdom of using the techniques of popular journalism to ease the communications problems of business and industry. I'd been very impressed—I am easily impressed by people who agree with me—and I was convinced that there was truth in the rumor that it had been Andy who had sold Balsley Hooten on the idea of an external magazine in the first place. Thus I felt vaguely indebted to Andy for my job. Which was fine with me. If you're to be indebted to somebody, it's nice to have him nice.

"I'm glad I bumped into you," I told him. "I'm sort of put down."

"Why? Somebody suing you? Or is that bubble-headed boss of yours out of his cage again?"

I gave him a look of elaborate reproof. "Careful, counselor. It's not ethical for an executive to make cracks about another executive in front of

said other executive's hired hand. Besides, that bubble-headed boss of mine is at a trade show in Chicago."

"Community-relations manager indeed. If he's a community-relations manager I'm a Zulu astronaut." He glowered into his coffee and made a sneering noise.

"You said it, I didn't."

"What can I do for you?" Andy asked, obviously anxious to get to more pleasant things.

"Nothing much. I'm just glad to see you."

He peered at me over the rim of his cup. "Nobody's ever glad to see a lawyer unless he's in trouble. What's your trouble?"

"No trouble. But I am considering an article on industrial security—the safeguarding of company secrets. Stuff like that. I thought you, as Hooten's answer to Perry Mason, might give me a few hundred thousand words on the subject." I sipped some of my coffee in what I planned to be an insouciant manner.

Andy put down his cup and fished a pack of Larks from somewhere. He made a thing of offering me one and I made a thing of declining one as a mutual stage business that would give his mind the time to rummage around for what it thought about industrial security. I could almost hear the pages rattle.

The report was favorable. "I think that might make a good story," he said. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, for starters, how widespread is industrial espionage?" I asked tentatively.

Andy rolled his eyes ceiling-ward. "Shee. How widespread is fornication?"

"Lots of it going on then, eh?"

"In every business, in every company, in every hour of the year. Other than that there isn't much."

"Who does it, and why?"

He lit his cigarette and considered the storm. Blowing a stream of smoke at the sugar bowl, he said: "Industrial supremacy rides on ideas. An idea in the mind of the guy in the white smock who writes curlicues on blackboards can eventuate in another nylon, say. And just think where you'd be today if your pappy had snaffled the idea for nylon from Doo Pont's blackboard one dark night in the thirties."

"Yeah, but how about patents?"

"A patent's only O.K. when you've got something pretty well isolated as your own original idea and have clear-cut command of the know-how. But with modern technology so intertwined and overlapping, it's getting more and more difficult for a company to nail down any part of it as a unique result of its own inventive effort. The patent system is becoming a real barrel of worms—very complicated and increasingly untrustworthy. So many companies find it safer not to file a patent until absolutely practical or necessary, if at all. Look at Hooten, for instance. He maintains a fully staffed Patent Division simply to advise him when, how, or if to file a patent."

I nodded a wise journalist's nod. "I see. And so the individual company's provisions for its own security against leaks and industrial spies become all the more important, eh?"

"Yea, verily."

"Why is there so much industrial cloak-and-dagger stuff these days? I mean, why so much

action today, as compared to sweeter, more gentle times?"

Andy hunched a shoulder. "Nowadays the competition is excruciating. New products are vomiting forth from all the mad scientists at the rate of some thirty thousand a year and at a research and development cost nearing ten billion bucks. So more and more of the newer, shakier outfits are finding it cheaper to let somebody else do the R and D and then peek over his fence. Ethically and legally it stinks, but the longer the folding green at stake the more unattractive honesty and propriety become. Fact of life, and all that crap."

"So how do the peekers peek?"

"Some hire professional spies who bribe the competitor's suppliers, or plant tipsters in the other firm's labs and factories, or tap phones, or bug conference rooms, or steam open mail—just like in the movies. But the easiest and cheapest way is to find a disgruntled employee and press coin of the realm into his outraged palm so that he'll not be so conscience-stricken when he blabs all he knows about his employer."

I stared into my coffee.

No different at all.

The same old crud.

What was the difference between Munich CIC Region Four and the Hooten Plastics Corporation?

Nothing. Nothing at all.

I got, you try to take. You try to take, I try to take you.

And with the same old lousy tricks that have been used by kings and con men and politicians and hoods and generals and grifters ever since one Neanderthal stood in the rain and envied another sitting in a cave.

So here it was again, as if twenty years had never happened.

Munich all over again.

For all the years of running, for all the years of trying to forget, it was Munich all over again.

And the worst part was, I was feeling the old excitement again—the reformed addict remembering the soaring keenness of a fresh fix.

“So what else do you want to know?” Andy was saying.

“Hm?”

“You want to talk some more, come around to the office about three o’clock.”

“Well, thanks, Andy. I don’t think I can today, though. Let me check you tomorrow. O.K.?”

He stood up and yawned. “Sure. It’s a seedy subject, you know. It’ll take some careful handling if you’re going to discuss it in that scandal sheet of yours.”

“Careful handling? You don’t know the half of it.”

When I returned to the office, I picked up the phone and got lucky. Each was in and talkative: Fred Matthews, director of production; Charlie Graham, director of sales; Aubrey Fenton, comptroller; Ben Gold, market analysis; Ray Sansom, director of employee relations. Each thought the article was a good idea and each gave me a long speech to tell me why.

George Kopeck, director of R and D, was too busy to talk, though. George Kopeck was always too busy to talk. But I got him to agree to see me tomorrow.

CHAPTER 3

It had stopped snowing by the time I left work. The drifts were atrocious, though, and the road leading down the hill from the Admin Building parking lot was a black snake of bumper-to-bumper horn tooters. The sunset sky was low and purple, promising more snow, and the air was heavy with that damp coldness that makes you shiver and resent Acapulco.

Fortunately I'd driven the Renault that day, and so once I had inched clear of the parking lot gate, I leapfrogged the stalled traffic and bounced and slithered and chewed my way through to Greer Street. At the intersection my car hung up momentarily beside Balsley Hooten's Rolls-Royce, and I'd felt a flip of malicious pleasure when my wheels caught again and spun a shower of slush against the twenty-thousand-dollar paint job.

As I turned off Greer and headed across town on

Central, I fell behind Andy Morris's Jeep Wagoneer, which was sailing at flank speed through a herringbone sea of snowbound cars. I tailgated him all the way to the Harrison Park circle, giving him a farewell bleep of the Renault's irritating little horn as I peeled off into the parking lot beside The Swollen Thumb.

I didn't stop because I wanted to, believe me. The Swollen Thumb was nothing more than a sexed-up hardware store, all sweet and cute with pine paneling and coach lamps and dedicated to that legion of harried husbands canonized as the do-it-yourself trade. I roundly hated the store's trick name, as I roundly hated the trick guys who served as ushers amid the power saws and elbow pipes and made The Husband—this husband in particular—feel like a Cub Scout at a Green Beret encampment. But it wasn't the husbands who kept the place solvent anyhow—it was the wives. The distaff really went for all the hoked-up atmosphere and the supercilious clerks with the boutonnieres on the lapels of their tailored coveralls. Consequently the Hootenville husband was used to phone calls ordering him to drop by The Thumb on the way home from work to pick up those few little things his wife had decided he needed.

Inside I had the misfortune to confront Claude Lacey, the owner and manager. "Ah, good evening, Mr. Dexter," he crooned superciliously. "May we help you?"

"I need some paint remover."

"Oh? Then Mrs. Dexter has been antiquing again?"

"I said *I* need some paint remover."

"What kind does she prefer?"

"The kind that takes paint off things."

"Oh, but my dear fellow, there are many, many solutions that will do that."

"What kind did I get last time?"

"If you'll excuse me a moment, I'll check Mrs. Dexter's account. Meanwhile, browse around, won't you? But don't touch things, please. We like to keep things spotless."

I wanted to tell him what he could do with his spots, but he'd only report it to my wife and she'd be mortified at my vulgarity and would make me feel like a pooch who had tinkled on the living room rug. So I feigned absorption in a display of imported curtain rods and tried to think of dirty words that rhymed with Lacey. (There aren't any, in case you're interested.)

The door swung open, setting off chimes that rang "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" It was Dom, and he winked and grinned at me from the depths of the hood attached to his cashmere ski parka. He did a little tap dance to get the snow off his boots, then chortled, "Well, well, well, if it isn't Hootenville's Harry Luce. Feeling better now?"

He was pretending concern for me while peering around for girls, I saw. In time his sparkling eyes gave up the search and returned to me. "What brings you to this den of inequity? A stopped-up john? A gloomy light bulb? A limp doorknob?"

"My wife is refinishing her old chest."

"Oh? It doesn't look so old to me."

"Her antique linen chest."

"Oh."

"What are you doing here?"

"Me?" He delivered me another wink. "I've got a little something stashed in an apartment over on Aurora Avenue. She called me at Ziggy Schroeder's to tell me that she's got a leak."

"She called you at Ziggy's to tell you that? Why doesn't she just find a rest room like anybody else?"

"A leak in her kitchen sink. She needs a gasket."

"Oh."

I picked up a three-way plug, then, remembering where I was, wiped it on my coat sleeve and returned it carefully to its bin on the counter. "Ziggy Schroeder? The Employee Relations guy? What are you doing for him?"

"A plant safety poster campaign."

"Oh. Funny—I keep forgetting I'm not your only client at Hooten Plastics."

"Heck, no," Dom enthused. "I do a lot of things for a lot of guys out there. Schroeder. Tommy Barron in product advertising. Duke Clooney in displays. George Kopeck in R and D. Al—"

"Kopeck?" I broke in, my sonar gear beginning to ping. "What would a mad scientist need from an art and design studio?"

Dom looked pleased with himself. "Dr. Kopeck wants to develop a recruitment brochure. Something dignified and full of the kind of pazazz that would lure otherwise sensible Ph.D.'s."

"But Employee Relations handles recruitment. How come Kopeck has—"

"Dr. Kopeck says only Ph.D's know how to talk to Ph.D's. What's more, Dr. Kopeck feels that the Employee Relations recruiters are, as he phrased it in his delicately cultivated speech, 'a bunch of god-dam, no-goodnik nincompoops who couldn't attract the attention of a Marcus Hook prostie.' "

"Doesn't he realize he'll have to have his brochure cleared through Employee Relations? Along with Community Relations and Legal?"

Dom shrugged. "Who cares? Kopeck swings

enough weight to bulldoze through almost anything he wants. His flag flies high around Hooten Castle. He wants a brochure, he gets a brochure."

"Yeah, but he personally had Yenom stolen from under his personal nose, too. They dearly love Dr. Kopeck down at Armbruster Company, Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, Zip Code Oh-Oh-Seven."

Dom snickered. "Armbruster's going to all the trouble of stealing a schlock product like Yenom is like me buying a thousand dollars' worth of burglar tools to break into this pansy hardware emporium and steal a box of penny nails. Big deal." He paused, looking around the shop again. "Which reminds me: Where do they keep kitchen sink things in this pansy hardware emporium?"

"I don't know. But you might ask my wife." I was thinking about what Dom had just said. He was right, of course. The Armbruster poaching didn't make too much sense. It costs a lot of money to set up the kind of industrial espionage net such as Andy Morris had described, and for Armbruster to peel off that kind of lettuce to pick up market lead time for what everybody but Balsley Hooten considered to be a workaday product was swatting a fly with a steam hammer. And, if the people at Armbruster had indeed established such a network, they would be fools to have compromised it for such tepid gain.

I was still brooding about this when there was an ahem behind me, followed by a parental clutch of my elbow.

"Mrs. Dexter says this is what she prefers," Lacey murmured, holding up a tin of something or other.

"Says? How do you know what she says?"

"I called her and asked, of course."

I felt my face go through the stoplight spectrum.
“You called her?”

Lacey smiled primly. “We go to great lengths to please our customers, Mr. Dexter.”

“You called my wife while I was standing right here?”

“Mm.”

Dom laughed, and this angered me even more.

“Look, you nuts and bolts farmer,” I told Lacey, “I don’t like strange men calling up my wife when I’m around to answer questions. Get me?”

“Well, after all, Mr. Dexter, I’m hardly a strange man to Mrs. Dexter.”

“You’d better be, pal.”

“I mean, she comes in here frequently.”

“She won’t anymore, if I have anything to say about it. And I do.” I grabbed the tin from his hand, did a draftee’s about-face, and made for the door, where I flung myself angrily into the night and strode off here and there.

“Well, I never,” I heard Lacey say before the door slammed.

As I drove out of the parking lot, I caught a glimpse of Lacey and Dom through the steamy shop window. They were in earnest conversation.

To hell with them both.

I cooled off, especially in the physical sense, during the ride home, and when I turned into our driveway I could feel the pull of modest pride. It was a pretty house and, aside from those who lived in it, its major asset was the way it sat on a gentle slope amid a fine grove of upstanding, emotionally mature maples. In my years of wandering, Peg had often talked of such a place, and the chance to buy this one at a figure I could afford was among the

decisive factors in my acceptance of the job offer from Hooten.

I plumped through the snow, raised the garage door, plumped back through the snow, then pulled the Renault into its berth beside the station wagon. I was brushing myself off and stamping my feet when the kitchen door opened and Peg poked her head into the garage.

"Don't start shoveling until after supper."

"I have no plans to shovel anything—either before or after supper."

"Well, somebody has to dig us out."

"What's wrong with that twelve-year-old food disposal unit called Billy doing it? He has bullet wounds, maybe?"

She looked at me like a wife. "He has homework, that's what he has."

"How about Gary Morris? His old man has a plow he lets Gary use. He could do it in a few minutes."

"Yes, and he'd charge us several dollars, too."

"Maybe I could float a loan at the bank." I despised myself for my inability to come right out and tell her that I'd already talked to Andy Morris about Gary's shoveling us out.

"Well, money doesn't grow on hedges, you know."

"Trees."

"What?"

"Money doesn't grow on trees."

"That's what I said."

"No you didn't. You said hedges."

"Well, whatever it grows on, it doesn't."

"Besides," I said truculently, "if I can shoot a couple of bucks on paint remover, why can't I

shoot a couple more on morale builder? My morale."

"Claude Lacey seemed rather put out when he called. Have you been abusing him again?" Her tone was pointed.

"Abusing *him*? Hoo-boy."

"He's a very nice man, and I don't see why you can't get along with him."

"He's a prune-faced faggot, that's what he is. And I told him he could expect not to see us around that swishy paint locker of his anymore."

"You *what*?"

"We're taking our business elsewhere."

"*Which* elsewhere? The Thumb's the only shop that understands *antiques*, and if you think I'm going to let you burn our bridges before they're hatched you're very, very mistaken."

"Peggy, when it comes to mixing metaphors you're a regular Waring blender," I sighed in irrelevant exasperation. "Do you mind if I come inside? It's cold in this garage. And I've had a bad day."

"Well, take off your galoshes first."

I took off my galoshes first.

CHAPTER 4

That night, while Gary Morris plowed us out, I went to the public library to look up what *The Wall Street Journal* and *Time* had to say about industrial espionage.

Well, not really. I went to the public library to be angry again. It was always safer and more in the interest of long-range domestic accord to be angry in the library than it was to be angry around the hearth.

It wasn't that I was so angry about the shoveling thing, or the promise that I would apologize to Claude Lacey sometime "soon," or the tense dinner, or Billy's euphoric collapse before the TV set to watch Bill Cosby be a spy when such a big thing had been made of his homework. These factors of themselves were intrinsic to my Suburbia—like leaf-raking, or fishing the newspaper out of a mud puddle, or hating the speakers at PTA meetings.

What really had touched me off was Peg's bland announcement that she had accepted an invitation to a cocktail party at LSD's on Saturday night. Leslie S. Drew, as the Hooten Corporation's community-relations manager, was my immediate boss. He was not known around the company as Old LSD thanks entirely to his initials; he was fat, lazy, and stupid and gave the impression that he was on an eternal trip. We got along fine—so long as I did the work and he got the credit. (On the masthead of *Plastimes*, for example, Balsley Hooten's name was at the top, directly under the logotype; LSD's name was immediately under Hooten's. My name, as editor, was in agate type at the bottom of the page, barely distinguishable from the photo credits and copyright symbol. Which was a fairly accurate representation of how things were around the office.) So I wasn't happy at the prospect of standing around with a murdered shrimp dangling from a toothpick and making small talk with LSD and the platinum-plated bores he liked to cultivate. But as unhappy as this expectation made me, the true seat of my rage was the fact that Peg hadn't called me to see if I really wanted to go.

As usual, *The Journal* had run a lot of names, places, and dates involving severely fiscal adventures and, as usual, *Time* had run an alum-puckered clutch of smart-aleck puns. I might as well have visited a weenie roast for all the practical enlightenment I got from the articles, so I sat at a long table, staring at a sign that read "Biographies A-Br" and turning loose what might loosely be termed my powers of reason.

In industrial espionage (I reasoned) there must

be two general methodologies—legal observation on the one hand and illegal, or unethical, hanky-panky on the other. In the first instance, patents, ads and publicity releases, trade shows and exhibits, sales reports, house organs, market surveys, annual reports to stockholders, brochures, catalogs—any or all of the tons of paper and blab pumped out by the typical U.S. manufacturer—could give a rival company many valuable leads. As in military intelligence, the mere reading of publicly published material could reveal mother lodes of data on The Other People. As for the second instance, the gray-to-black area of subterfuge and covert espionage could fill in the cracks: pumping the competitor's salesmen; photographing the competitor's plants; hiring or blackmailing the competitor's people; bribing the competitor's disenchanted employees and suppliers; planting an agent on the competitor's payroll; bugging the competitor's phones and offices; stealing the competitor's blueprints; intercepting the competitor's mail. All those fun things.

One or all of these could have been utilized by Armbruster in its usurpation of Hooten's proprietary rights in the Yenom process. Back in the old days, I mused, if faced with this kind of tangle we would have blasted—setting up the old prodigal son routine. A piece of cake, it would have been. Especially if we had been working against an amateur. Sniffing out a real pro called for much elaborate groundwork and fancy footwork by a squad of first-line agents. But an amateur—a turncoat with gold fever or revenge as his motive—was to yawn. Like the Bloody Dove Caper. That had been almost a vacation, compared with some of the assignments I had drawn in my time. I had been compelled to go deep on the dark side in

Operation Hiccup, in the Boondock Affair, in the Case of the Purple Girdle. But on the Bloody Dove Caper I had set up and sprung—single-handed—in ten days. Ten of the Good Old Days.

I shifted my weight and moved my eyes to "Biography F-Ga."

The Bloody Dove Caper?

Ten days?

Oh, come *on*, Dexter.

Just do the article, as Balsley Hooten says. The old days are for remembering, not for reliving.

Firming up my responsible-husband muscles, I closed the magazines, folded the newspapers, and prepared to leave. But it seemed impossible to get out of the chair.

It might work at that, by God.

Son of the Bloody Dove Caper, eh?

But I didn't have access to official funds.

Well, how about dames, then?

But who?

Maudie?

No. Too sweet and innocent.

Minah?

Yecch.

Who then?

Ah.

Yes. Of course.

Hold on, Dexter: Do you want to risk the loss of your family's affection?

What affection?

Do you want to ruin your status in the community?

Status-shmatus. Besides, if I actually find Balsley Hooten's spy, I might enjoy a considerable boost in status. And so there.

Ah, but would you—simply for a brief escape from the bog of conformity, inertia, and stifling boredom—want to relive the physical and moral dangers of an ancient, dimly remembered war?

You bet I would.

Somewhere in all this I got that feeling you get when somebody is watching you.

I glanced around the big room, with its somber bookshelves and medieval ceiling and faint smell of dust and disinfectant, but the only people within eye range were a gaggle of teen-agers in the far corner, a drowsing drunk by the newspaper rack, and a grandma with pursed lips pondering a back issue of *Hot Rod* magazine. At the check-out desk near the entrance, two librarians whispered shop talk back and forth. And that was it.

But somebody had been watching me. My neck hairs told me so.

I sat for a time, trying to get a fix on the somebody, but I could have spared myself the trouble. Finally I suspended the effort, concluding that my decision to play games had already caused me to imagine things.

The important thing was that I was feeling better than I'd felt in three years. And I always *feel* better when I'm feeling better.

I dropped the newspapers and magazines at the desk and went out to join the winter night. The wind was stirring again, and scuds of powdery snow moved along in little whirlpools and made sparkling coronas around the streetlights. It was very cold and quiet, and there was no traffic to speak of. At the corner of Main and Faber there was an outdoor phone booth and, as I paused to dig for a dime, I thought I heard footsteps

crunching on the soda-cracker snow in the gloom to my rear.

I looked around to find that I was being followed by a nomadic sheet of newspaper that skittered before the restive wind as if at the command of Alfred Hitchcock's propman. Across the square the Hooten Theater's marquee blinked a silent call to crowds that weren't there, and the brunette in the ticket booth yawned sleepily over her magazine. She was the only soul in sight, and her distant presence did nothing to alleviate the uneasiness that had dispossessed my sense of amused excitement.

Baloney. So what was to be uneasy about? I had two weeks of sport ahead of me.

I gathered myself and got busy with the phone, blinking in the bright light of the booth. There were three purrs at the other end, then a click.

"This is the Hooten residence," a voice like Arthur Treacher's said.

"Is he in, please? Mr. Dexter calling."

"Mr. Dexter?" There was a pause. Then: "Does Mr. Hooten know you, sir?"

"Of course he does. And to know me is to love me." I did not try to hide my annoyance.

"May I ask why you are calling, sir?" He wasn't giving an inch.

"I propose to do something in his interest. I want to get his permission first. Now put him on, Jeeves."

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Hooten is in New York."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

"Mr. Hooten likes to know who calls and why, sir," he said obliquely.

"When will he be back?"

"Friday morning, sir."

"All right, I'll see him then." I hung up and said a silent damn. Bad luck, this. With less than two weeks in which to maneuver, every hour was important. I'd simply have to forge ahead and explain my strategy in his office on Friday. I fed the phone another dime.

"Hello?" The voice was thick.

"Dom?"

"So who did you expect—Ronald Reagan?"

"I'm glad to find you home. I didn't really think you'd be there."

"I'm not. This is a recorded message."

"May I come see you?"

There was a moment of silence, and then he cleared his throat and said, "You call at an awkward time."

"I'd really like to come over. Not for long. I—"

"If it's something about the March issue, it's too late for changes, you know. We're already plating up."

"No, it's not the magazine. It's something personal, like."

He thought again for a moment. Then: "Well, I'll make her take another bath, or something, while we talk. O.K.?"

"Sure."

"But you won't be too long, will you? I wouldn't want her to get waterlogged."

"Ten, fifteen minutes. All right?"

"Where are you? Home?"

"Downtown. I'll be there in five minutes."

"Make it ten. In ten minutes she'll need a bath."

He rang off, and I was about to hang up the receiver myself when I saw a black Chrysler churn around the corner of Depew Street at the far side of the library, its skid chains thumping in the

snow. There was something peculiar in the way its lights dimmed before it crumped to a halt near the library's side door, so I nodded my head and faked a conversation with the dead phone while I watched. The old sixth sense at work, so to speak. After a time a man stepped out of the murk and mushed quickly to the car and climbed into the back seat. But not so quick as to avoid the headlights of a cab that came around the square en route to the train station and a rendezvous with the 8:38 from Philly.

It was the drowsy drunk.

But he was about as drowsy and drunk as a Methodist minister on a Sunday at noon.

Dom's base camp was a five-room apartment on the second floor of a glass and chrome thing that loomed among the oaks on Elm Street. I stood in the corridor outside Dom's door and waited for something to react to my finger on the buzzer. The something was Dom, who opened the door and peered at me from his fashionable dressing robe and exuded a mixture of booze vapors and perfume.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," he said. "I guessed wrong. It took twelve minutes."

"That's O.K.," I said. "It gave me a chance to catch a movie."

"Come in." He grinned and held out a hand.

I jettisoned my hat and overcoat and stood tentatively while he hung them in a closet. Somewhere there was the sound of a gushing faucet.

"Want a drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, come in and sit down. You look like Mary Poppins at a stag movie."

I followed him into the living room—a long, broad expanse of ankle-deep carpeting, cozy lamp-light, and futuristic furniture. The hi-fi was murmuring some Debussy and a trio of logs glowed cheerily in the corner fireplace. Dom moved to the bar, where he made himself a tall one while eyeing me in quizzical good humor.

I folded myself into a big Dixie cup I assumed to be a chair and said, “Nice place you have here.”

He glanced around the room as if it were suddenly new to him, too. His handsome face registered undisguised satisfaction. “Yeah,” he said. “Not bad for a South Philly paisan, eh?”

“Not bad at all.”

We traded glances, and I hoped mine wasn’t furtive.

“What you look so furtive for?” Dom asked. “You expect a raid, or something?”

“Well, no. I just—”

“What’s on your mind, Dex? You got a problem?”

“In a way, yes.”

“Like what kind of problem?”

“Can we talk?”

“Sure. She’s awash by now.”

I shifted my position in the fancy chair and tried to cross my legs. I couldn’t. The chair was made for sitting, and that’s that.

“I wonder if you’d do me a favor.” I did not look at him.

“Just name it, Dex.”

“I’d like to go on the town a bit. Your part of town.”

I could almost feel his startled examination. “You? On the town?”

“Yeah.”

"It's none of my business, but I thought you were happily married."

"I'm married."

He dropped another ice cube into his drink and said nothing. There was a long pause in which the hi-fi drifted into something cut by Frankie Carle when he had been in a solemn mood. I felt as if I needed a bath myself.

"So," Dom said in sudden bright jolliness, "you want to play a little. So O.K., there's no law says you can't." He rubbed his hands together.

"Oh, yes, there is."

"Like what law?" Dom's voice lost some of its false gaiety. "Like poker? Craps? Horses? Numbers? What?"

"Dames."

He remained quiet for another interval, lifting his drink and studying it as if he'd just seen a flounder swim through the Scotch. "Oh," he said finally, "you're that kind of married."

"Yeah."

"You want a playmate or two to get unbored."

"Yeah."

"And you want me to introduce you around."

"Yeah."

"You think I'm some kind of pimp, or something?"

"Of course not. But you know your way around. You'll have to admit that."

"Oh, I admit that, all right."

"Well, then?"

"What's your pleasure?" His tone was wary.

"I want you to take me to The White Birches," I said.

He gave me one of his long stares. "You must be joking," he said.

"No. I want to go to The Birches."

"But, my God— You go there and your name'll be mud around this burg. Guy in your position, married and with Hooten and all, should stay the hell away from The Birches."

"I understand some very well-to-do individuals frequent The Birches," I said as primly as I could. "What's good enough for the upper crust is good enough for me."

He shook his gorgeous head of hair. "No, Dex. Don't do it. Sure, there are some rich playboys go there, and some not so rich. But all of them are like me. They don't give a damn what people in this crappy little town might think or say, and nearly all of them are bachelors or divorced or something."

"Well," I said, "I'm or something."

"You and Peg have a fight?"

"None of your business."

"Why don't you go home and bounce her on the springs and let her know who's boss? She'll think you're great tomorrow morning."

"I said it's none of your business."

"You're trying to make it my business, aren't you?"

I felt a flare of exasperation. It was enough to help me sound convincing when I said, "Oh, come off it, Dom. We're both big boys now. I have a wife who equates me with her vacuum cleaner or automatic washer. I'm the appliance that makes groceries. The only time we bounce the springs is when we turn the mattress in the summer and winter. I'm sick and tired of being lonely and taken for granted. I want to laugh and wrestle. Just like in the old days." I was vaguely surprised and depressed to hear how convincing I sounded.

Dom shook his head again. "I don't think you're the right kind of guy for this kind of caper. You're one of those scrub-faced Presbyterians who'd come all apart with guilts the first time you patted a strange tokus. Further-damn-old-more, going to The Birches would not only clobber your conscience—it would fix your crock with Hooten. Don't you know the Old Nanny gets reports on any of his employees who might go near the place? What the hell do you think got Harry Steiger fired? Bad breath?"

He was honestly feeling bad about all this, I saw. I tried to make it easier for him.

"Tell you what, Dom: You sneak me into The Birches just once. I'll make arrangements to carry out whatever I set up somewhere else. Like her place. Like a motel. Like something."

He waved a hand of surrender. "All right, all right," he sighed. "You want to ruin your life you got a right to, I guess. So when do you want to go?"

"When's the best time?"

He thought about that, lighting a cigarette and blowing twin streams of smoke from his movie idol's nose. "How long will it take you?" he asked pensively. "To set it up, I mean."

"Just get me in and give me, oh, a half an hour, like. I'm a fast talker."

"Well, then, I suggest tomorrow at about four o'clock. It's the predinner lull at The Birches then and there aren't likely to be too many nosy-benders around. I'll meet you at the hamburger stand just off Route two-oh-two on Guensy Road at a quarter to four. You can leave your car there and we'll take mine to the place. O.K.?"

"Sure."

He examined his cigarette, the same thoughtful look on his face. "Dex," he said suddenly, "are you absolutely sure you want The Birches? Hell, I can line you up with all sorts of dames. Friends of mine."

"No, Dom," I said, "it's got to be for money. I don't want a love affair. I merely want appointments. Like I'm going to a psychiatrist, or something."

He pounded his cigarette to death in a brass ashtray and said, "Oh, brother. You are the absolute limit, you are."

"Yeah."

The Chrysler was parked coyly under the oaks down the block, and I was surprised that I was so unsurprised.

Somebody had a tag on me.

Who?

Why?

Very curious, this.

I had talked to—let's see—nine souls about an article on industrial espionage.

And before the day was out somebody had put a tag on me.

Very curious indeed.

CHAPTER 5

George Kopeck was shaped like a flower vase—long and thin until he arrived at his hips, where he flared into a globe of impressive circumference. The effect was heightened by the ankle-length lab coat he liked to wear and by his fuzzy head, which sat atop it all like an irritable dandelion gone to seed. He was shaking this part of him now in an emphatic negative.

“No,” he grumped, “you’re wasting your time.”

“It’s Mr. Hooten’s idea, George,” I said. “And besides, why be so touchy about Yenom at this stage of the game? Spilled milk, and all that.”

“You must understand, Dexter: I do not discuss Yenom, since I cannot speak of it without using words and curses. Dirty words and curses are clinical indicators of weakness in character. I do not have any weaknesses of character and so therefore I can’t use dirty words and curses. If I can’t use

dirty words and curses, I therefore cannot discuss that goddam sonofabitchin' product. Q.E.D."

"Oh."

There was one of those awkward little lulls.

"So. Is there anything else I can do for you?" He said this in Princetonian tones that Princetonians reserve for people they would like to get the hell out of the office.

Undaunted, I forged on in International Correspondence School tones that International Correspondence Schoolers reserve for people whose offices they would like to get the hell out of. "Well, as I say, Mr. Hooten has suggested that I develop an article for *Plastimes* that points out the problem of protecting company secrets against spies and poachers. The story is to serve two purposes: first, to put our external audience—customers, suppliers, public opinion leaders, and so on—on tacit notice that those who might try to steal Hooten Corporation secrets will from now on run into a rat's nest of security measures; and second, to encourage our internal audience—employees, stockholders—to watch what they say about what they know. Mr. Hooten says you, as director of R and D, will be glad to give me a little background on the Yenom fiasco so that I can build the article around a true case history, like."

Kopeck squinted at me through eyeglasses whose lenses couldn't have been much thicker than man-hole covers. He humphed. "I wish Balsley Hooten would mind his own business."

"It is his business. Remember?"

"He makes me tired. Just because he owns the business, he thinks he can do anything he wants around here." Kopeck folded his arms and regarded

me with Phi Beta Kappa hauteur. "What would you like to know, Dexter?"

I opened my notebook and poised my pencil. "What is Yenom exactly, and why would Armbruster want to steal it?"

Kopeck's face turned a pale mauve. It was no secret that Kopeck took the theft of Yenom most personally, as if Yenom itself had walked out of his office and defected to Armbruster. "Well," he managed, "basically Yenom is a thermoplastic with all the merits of glass and few of the disadvantages. You see, glass is the world's oldest and most widely used transparent thermoplastic. With its low cost and inertness to most materials, it stands as a model of comparison for the transparent synthetics achieved through chemistry. As I said in my paper before the ISOCAPS in September last, if glass weren't so brittle, few synthetics would find any markets. Polystyrene plastic approximates glass in terms of low cost and broad usage but, like glass, it breaks easily. The acrylics are optically beautiful synthetics with a high degree of resistance to abrasion and weather and things but they, too, are breakable. The cellulosics and polycarbonates are among the toughest transparent thermoplastics but are very expensive to make. Several years ago I was struck by an exciting idea. I can't describe it for you. Suffice it to say that I perceived how to make a polystyrene plastic that would combine the high transparency and low cost of glass with the extraordinary toughness of a polycarbonate. That goddam sonofabitchin' product the company calls Yenom was the result."

"I see," I said, all solemn and scientific. "I understand that these qualities of Yenom make it an

ideal material for use in optical devices that must withstand rugged abuse."

He nodded an impatient professor's nod.

"Well, like what abuse, George?"

"Dr. Kopeck," he reminded irritably.

"Like what abuses, Dr. Kopeck?"

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Like those found in interplanetary probe mechanisms. Moon rockets, that kind of thing. Also guided missiles—projectiles that stay on course by use of optical devices."

"How about commercial applications, George?"

He shook his fuzzy head again. "Up to now we've been able to make it only in small lots, and every scrap of those lots has been snaffled by the military and NASA. These uses have accelerated the development of Yenom but have not brought it to full-scale production. We have much R and D to pursue before we can realize its full potential."

"But Armbruster is not so restricted, eh?"

He got a funny look on his funny face and the mauve effect turned to what Peg might call an off-fuchsia. "That's right," he said stiffly.

"Any idea as to how Armbruster might have tumbled to the Yenom process?"

He returned the glasses to his nose and examined his hands. When he spoke, I had a fleeting sense of his speaking too patly. It was something impossible to name, but it was there, and I made a mental note of it. "Who's to say?" he said. "I'm a research scientist, not a detective. We had a secret that's no longer a secret. Why or how I cannot say."

"How about patents? Didn't we file any?"

He answered again in that crisply prepared way. "The Yenom process was not patentable. But under the law it was a trade secret, since we spent a

lot of time, money, and effort in perfecting a special know-how formulation to produce entirely new results. This, by any definition, is a trade secret protected by statute.”

I nodded profoundly, in the manner of those who interview people on TV when they don't know what the hell the interviewee is talking about. “Well,” I said, “the world is full of blabbermouths, and Hooten has its share, I suppose.”

“I despise blabbermouths,” George snapped. “They are weak characters.”

“Yeah, and they talk a lot, too.”

“I only hope that we don't have any working on the Formula F project,” he said moodily.

My antenna froze, whirred, then swept back across the quadrant to lock in on this bleep from outer space.

“Oh, yes,” I said mildly. “Mr. Hooten told me to ask you about Formula F. What is it?”

“It's a secret process I've worked up that promises a product of truly remarkable characteristics. It involves a polymer—a long chain of molecules with countless linkages along the chain. The major constituent of Formula F is ethylene, and the material exhibits many of the desirable features of polyethylene, including chemical inertness. Polymer properties can be controlled by adjusting the ionic content and altering the cation species, as well as varying the usual parameters of molecular weight and degree of crystalline order. Thus Formula F can be produced for a wide variety of end uses. It can be processed by conventional thermoplastic processing equipment. It can be injection-molded; blow-molded; extruded in shapes, film, substrate coatings, and wire insulation. Its exceptional strength permits deep-draw in forming oper-

ations and high drawdown to thin coatings in extrusion coatings. In short, it's a remarkable product that will tackle a remarkable number of jobs."

"Any fool can see that," I said. "But what remarkable jobs, George?"

"We haven't completed a full evaluation yet. So I'd rather not say."

"Oh."

"I'm surprised Mr. Hooten even mentioned it to you."

"I'm sworn to secrecy until you introduce it formally. You'll want magazine coverage at that time, of course."

He threw out his hands and made a noise. "Don't hold your breath, Dexter," he snorted in aristocratic exasperation. "As with Yenom, every scrap we make is sent direct to the Army Missile Propellant Center. The military has put maximum security over Formula F. Commercial development will have to wait, as usual."

I yawned to pretend that I had dismissed the subject. Then I arose from my chair, folded my notebook, put the pencil behind my ear, and said, "Well, George, it's been. Much obliged for your help."

"You are not planning to quote me in the Yenom article, are you, Dexter?"

"Well, yes. I think it would strengthen the story."

"I detest personal publicity, you know."

"You prefer I leave your name out of the story, then?"

"K-O-P-E-C-K. Don't forget the C."

"C it is, George."

"With the Doctor, too, of course."

"Of course."

I took my time walking across the campus-like hilltop that separated Kopeck's R and D empire from the Admin Building. The day was starkly bright, making sharp blue designs where the snowdrifts cast their shadows, and the air was astringent and full of the far-off scent of pines and the Pocono vastness. The walks had been neatly plowed by the night shift maintenance force and the few souls that wandered their pattern made little steam puffs with their breath and traded cheery complaints over the fresh fall of snow. I breathed deeply and thought accordingly, my mind turning over the leaves of fact and fantasy and downright hunch.

The first result of these ruminations was a visit to the Technical Library. This was a cloister of bookracks and files and tables and chairs and smells of leather and polish that had been inserted between the first-floor bastions of Sales and Treasurer's and was superintended by a triangular matron named Simmons. Since I have the misfortune of bearing a face that shrieks *bookloser*, the librarian had always greeted me with the cordiality of a Sabine woman for a passing rapist.

"Good morning, Miss Simmons. Peachy day."

"Well?"

"I'd like to look at a few things."

"Like what things?"

"Like the annual report of the Armbruster Company."

"And?"

"And a detailed personnel organization chart for the same noble enterprise."

"No."

"No what, Miss Simmons?"

"No detailed organization chart for Armbruster

or any other company. No company in its right mind makes its detailed personnel organization chart available to the competition or to the general public or to any young man who comes around and borrows a seven-day book and gets it back in five weeks in flagrant disregard of company library rules and makes me write all sorts of memos and—”

“Miss Simmons. Please,” I broke in. “That all happened two years ago. And I honestly thought the book had been lost, and I wrote you a formal letter of apology and even offered to replace the straying volume. Have you no charity in your heart?”

“No.”

“May I have the annual report, please?”

“Only if you read it here.”

“And do you by chance have any general literature on the U.S. Army Missile Propellant Center?”

“The one in Maryland?”

“Is that the one that buys Yenom?”

She nodded sourly.

“Fine. I’ll take it.”

“You will not. You’ll read it right here.”

“Yes, sir, ma’am.”

The Armbruster annual report was a glossy razzle-dazzle full of gaudy four-color plates and bone-lean information. Its references to key personnel and their assignments were confined to a third-cover listing of president, vice-presidents, and departmental directors. I made a note of Hamilton McCorkle who, so the noble font proclaimed, was director of legal affairs. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

Setting the book aside, I experienced an irrele-

vant and fleeting sense of evil—a premonition of disaster—and I'd have given my three typing fingers to be able to call Peg and tell her about this silly problem and what I might have to do to solve it.

But it had been a long time since I could talk to my wife. Moreover, she had made it amply clear exactly how lousy she was at keeping secrets these days.

Everybody was lousy at keeping secrets.

Look at George Kopeck.

Look at Peg.

I shook myself like a wet dog and opened the little brochure put out by the public relations people at the Missile Propellant Center to explain who they were and what they were doing down there on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay to Give the Taxpayer Full Value for His Money. But little was the word. Little brochure, little information. We Are the Biggest This; We Are the Best That; We Number 5,000 Strong; We Are Doing Big Things to Let You Sleep Easy at Night; We Are the Livin' Damn Old Nerts. End of Message.

Among the superlatives were sprinkled Spartan facts, though. The Center manufactured solid propellants and auxiliary motors for the military services and NASA. The research and development section evaluated new propellant systems by thermochemical calculation, lab investigations, and pilot plant processing. The production section turned out propellant grains for service missiles, conventional and high-energy casting powder and ingredients not commercially available.

And that was about that.

I sat back and did some more thinking, and

the upshot of this exercise in brilliance was that I was alone, lonely, uninformed, stupid, incapable, ineffectual, inept, and about to court social suicide, thanks to a weird kind of second childhood.

Otherwise, things looked good.

I gathered up the books, waddled to the desk, and returned the treasures to Miss Simmons, who rewarded me with a stare that spoke of daggers and seeping blood.

Then I went out into the sun and snow and scent of far-off places, and as I headed for the office I remembered other years and other places and laughter and goodwill.

Peg, Peg, Peg.

Whatever happened to the good old days?

CHAPTER 6

Stats of the layouts for the April number were on my desk, dutifully awaiting picture captions. Dom had done himself proud, and if I hadn't been so aware of what Mr. Hooten's spy thriller could do to ruin them, I might have delighted in the balance of esthetics and editorial weights the layouts achieved. I hung up my coat and hat and spent some time with the problem, deciding eventually to lift out the four-page piece on the use of Zynar in undersea explorations. I could replace it with the security article, thus leaving the balance of the book intact and preserving most of Dom's good effects. It wasn't the ideal solution, but it was a solution.

Next I made an attempt to block out the new story, but my mind persisted at intimate, yearning flashbacks. Surrendering finally, I picked up the

phone and dialed the house. Peg answered on the first ring.

"Hi," I said, pleased to find her home.

"Oh, it's you," she said.

"Well, you don't have to sound so disappointed."

"I'm not disappointed. I was expecting Minah Morris to call, that's all."

"Then you're disappointed."

"What do you want, Dex?"

"I was lonesome for you."

"You mean that's the only reason you called?"

"Do I need a better one?"

"Well, no, for heaven's sake. But I really am waiting for Minah, you know." There was an edge of impatience in this.

"You and Minah got something on?"

"We're going out to the Cobwebs. Franny Myers says there is a gorgeous dry sink to be had out there—for practically nothing at all."

I had my doubts about this latter, since the most recent practically-nothing-at-all had come to seventy-eight dollars. But I shaped my mouth so that I'd sound as if I were smiling and said, "Good. It's nice that you and Minah have a hobby to share like that. But I envy her. She sees you more than I do."

"You didn't carry out the trash this morning like I asked you to."

"Oh. That's right. I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Billy needs batteries for his bike lamp. Pick up some at The Thumb on the way home, will you?"

"I can't. I'll be getting home later than usual. About six-thirty, I'd say."

"Well, why, for pity's sake?"

"Work. I'll be held up by work. The U.S. male's chronic disease."

"You know tonight's my night for a buffet and bridge at Nancy's."

"No, I didn't know."

"Oh, for crying out loud. I told you three weeks ago that I'd be going to Nancy's tonight. You are the very limit."

"But three weeks—"

"You should have marked it on your calendar."

"I suppose I should have, but—"

"Sometimes I think you don't really care a fig leaf for my little needs."

"Now listen, Peg—"

"You don't do the teensy chores I ask you to do, you refuse to run a tiny errand to make your son happy, you simply dismiss dinner with a wave of the flag, you upset my one little night out, you—"

"One little night out? Oh, come on. You've been out three nights in the past five. And—"

"Oh, so now you're keeping count, are you?"

"No, I'm not. I— Oh, for God's sake. You're impossible to talk to anymore."

"Well, you called me, you know."

"I called you because I was thinking about you, and missing you, and I was wishing for something that had you all mixed up in it, and remembering things. What's so wrong about that?"

"You don't make any sense at all. Not at all."

"Do you remember Munich, Peg? How we used to go to the Kleinhesselohs once a month for dinner? We'd save up and then splurge, and we'd dance, and laugh, and then we'd go down by the lake behind the bushes and—"

"We could have been arrested for what we did in the bushes. Now, really, Dex, Minah—"

"Oh, to hell with Minah Morris. This is your husband. He misses you."

"Have you been up to something?" A new sound came into her voice.

"Up to something?"

"You always act funny like this when you've been up to something."

"What means up to something, for God's sake?"

"You don't have to swear at me, you know."

"I'm not swearing at you. I only said for God's sake, for God's sake."

There was a strained interval. Then she said, "Well, since you'll be getting home at all hours of the day and night, I'll leave a TV dinner for you. I'll feed Billy and Suzy early."

"All right. Good-bye."

"And do try to do something about those batteries. Maybe on your lunch hour."

"All right. Good-bye."

"And please use your calendar after this."

"All right. Good-bye."

She hung up. And I stared at the wall some more.

"All right," I said into the silence. "All right. Thanks for making it easier."

There were sixty-four squares in the grille that covered the air outlet on my wall, in case you want to know.

The White Birches was an enormous pile of colonnades and shutters whose original ell had been built in Seventeen Hundred and Something to serve as still another place for George Washington to sleep. If he had indeed sacked out there, he was the inn's last guest of any discernible quality. For with American Independence, The Birches had be-

gun to attract itinerant ladies who asserted a certain moral independence of their own, and the mere passage of two centuries could do little to dissipate the clouds of disrepute that had, as a consequence, settled over the place.

After War Two, a syndicate had acquired the inn and its surrounding five hundred acres of hill-top, planning a kind of compact Banff for affluent New York and Philadelphia families too busy or too tired to toddle off to the real article. The dream of respectability fizzled on opening day when a squad of hoods in sunglasses rented all three floors on behalf of their boss, a renowned and hedonistic TV band leader who wanted some privacy to practice on his strumpet. To the management's dismay, this famous personage liked The Birches so much he took a permanent suite and invited down the Broadway crowd almost every weekend. The innkeepers' dismay turned to grim satisfaction when they got a load of the year-end profit statements, and there ensued a decade of happy decadence all around.

The TV artist had long since moved on to the West Coast. With his going, the owners concluded that since evil is the root of all money—all fast money, anyhow—they should turn The Birches into a private membership club for men. They installed a second nine holes of golf, a trio of tennis courts, an indoor swimming pool, a library of erotica, a bar that stretched from here to there, and a corps of dazzlingly endowed hostesses who were expected to listen to the troubles of the tired clientele. These female staffers proved to be unabashedly willing to take their troubles lying down, and so no Hootenville family man in his right mind would

be seen anywhere within howitzer shot of the place.

But who ever said I was in my right mind?

I unfolded myself from the fetal position enforced by the bucket seat of Dom's sports car—which was a Stupid-Moron or a Dirty-Bastard or some other one of those hyphenated British types I could never keep straight—and took the hand of the doorman, who heaved me to the curb.

"Thanks, doctor," I said. "Nice delivery."

"Sir?" The doorman eyed me narrowly with eyes that had seen everything there ever was. He was tall and thick, as friendly as a Bowery barkeep, and entirely unmoved by my boyish charm.

Dom surrendered the car to a parking attendant and, taking my elbow, steered me up the broad steps to the main entrance. He looked worried.

"I'm worried," he said in a stage whisper.

"So am I. But what's worrying you these days?"

"Carl isn't smiling."

"Carl?"

"The doorman."

"So what?"

"That means he doesn't like you."

"Gee whillikers and golly."

"I'm serious. It's not good that Carl doesn't like you," Dom said, nodding hello to a fat man in a Chesterfield coat and bowler who came through the front door. The man nodded back, rolled his two-dollar cigar to the other corner of his mouth, and waddled down the steps toward Carl, who, I saw, was beaming at him and waving imperiously at the parking lot jockey.

"Did it ever occur to you that I might not like Carl, either?" I huffed.

"Don't let the liver-colored livery fool you. He's

an important character around here. He's the first line of defense. If he doesn't like your looks, he can flag you, and there'll be no fun and games."

"There's an old Bulgarian colloquialism that goes like this: Up Carl's giggy with a hot cross bun."

The center hall was a tunnel of dark oak paneling and discreet little lamps that glowed beneath a gallery of oil portraits of Revolutionary War types, who peered out from under their powdered wigs as if they smelled a cabbage rotting in the cellar. Their eyes seemed to follow me, and, as we paused at the entrance to what appeared to be the library, I took a moment to stare back at them.

A big redhead in a slate-gray cocktail dress came out of the gloom to bare her magnificent teeth in that leer affected by the women in lipstick commercials. "Why, Mr. Dominico," she breathed, "how wonderful to see you. And so early in the evening, too."

Dom lit up like a bookie's silk suit and matched her tooth for tooth. "We-e-e-ll," he enthused, "as I live and wheeze: Gwen Goodman. Still as beautiful as ever, I see."

She batted her foot-long eyelashes and rearranged the smile. "Where have you been all these weeks, darling boy?"

"On safari in Alaska. Missed you awfully."

She looked at me. "And who is this incredibly handsome chap?"

"Oh," Dom cooed. "Miss Goodman, this is Mr. Frammerdammer. From Duluth. Ed, meet Miss Goodman."

"How do you do," I said. "But my name is really Paul Dexter, and I'm from Hootenville."

She nodded and winked. "I know. I've seen you at The Swollen Thumb."

"Oh? You go there, too?"

"Mm-hm. My hobby is welding. I love, simply love, to weld things. But come in and sit down, you two. You must be tired and thirsty, and I'd love to introduce you to some of our new hostesses."

"Lead on," Dom commanded, all hearty and full of instant chase. "Maybe you can weld me to a blonde, eh?"

The girls came in by calculated haphazard, each managing to strike model poses in the soft lamp-light. But they were all too much like Miss Goodman. I mean, long and narrow and glazed over. Except for one. She came stalking into the library as if she were in hot pursuit and, as she passed the glow of the big fireplace, I could see she was not wearing a slip. The somebody she was in hot pursuit of turned out to be Miss Goodman.

"Hey," the girl said, "where in hell can I get some coat hangers?"

Miss Goodman looked as if she had just swallowed a shot of Esso Extra. "Please, Miss D'Arcy: this is hardly the time—"

"The hell it ain't, sister. The creep that hired me said this place was first class. Any place that ain't got no coat hangers in a girl's closet ain't first class."

"Miss Goodman glanced at us in the manner of an apologetic interpreter. "Miss D'Arcy just joined us today. And I understand she'll be leaving before the end of the week," she added with dark meaningfulness.

"You're goddam right I am, sweetie. I'm here to Sunday, and that's all."

Miss Goodman, her eyes briefly hot and mean, said, "You'll find coat hangers in the service closet in the upper hall."

Miss D'Arcy blew angrily at her blue-black hair, turned on a heel, and strode from the room, her bottom swinging.

Dom tried to bridge the stilted silence with a laugh. "How did that one slip in, Gwen? Pretty rough around the edges, isn't she?"

"I'm going to have some very direct talk with our personnel recruitment manager," the redhead said, reverting to her preciousity. "I can assure you of that, Mr. Dominico."

"Excuse me," I said, standing up.

I hurried out of the library and down the hall past the bar to the elegant winding stairway, which Miss D'Arcy was mounting with set jaw and blazing eye.

"Hey, wait a sec," I said.

She glowered down over the banister, hesitating. "Well, what do you want, buster?"

"I want to ask you something. Come on. I'll buy you a drink."

"I don't drink when I'm off duty, pal."

"Well, a coffee, then. O.K.?" I gave her my Rock Hudson grin.

She looked me over very carefully. "You remind me of somebody," she said.

"Rock Hudson?"

"Mahatma Gandhi."

"Come on. Coffee's hot."

"Sorry, dad. I've got some packing to do."

"That's what I want to talk to you about. Where are you going when you leave here Sunday?"

"New York. Where else?"

"Will you lay over for a day or so?" I felt an immediate blush. "I mean—"

"Not in this antique emporium, I won't."

"Somewhere else, I mean."

"Like what somewhere else?" she asked suspiciously.

I swallowed and made the plunge. "Like a motel?"

Her violet eyes went up and down my frame like a first sergeant's at a Class A inspection. Her anger retreated somewhat. "You like me, huh?"

"You're nifty."

"It costs a hundred dollars a day for me to lay over. And expenses."

I swallowed again. "O.K., it's a deal. You be at the train station Sunday night at seven-thirty. You got a driver's license?"

"Sure."

"Then rent a Hertz something and wait for me in the main lot at the station."

She held out a glossy manicure. "Hertz wants a deposit. You got a deposit?"

I took out my wallet and removed the fifty-one dollars I'd saved for Peg's birthday present, due next month. The guilt made the bills literally burn my fingers. "Here. This fifty should do it."

She took the money and, raising her skirt, stuffed it in her stocking, just as they do in those lousy Westerns.

"Righty-tight, then," she said. "Sunday at seven. What's your name, buddy?"

"Dexter. Paul Dexter." I added: "And it's seven-thirty."

"O.K., Paul honey. See you, huh?"

"What's your name, by the way?"

"Matilda D'Arcy. Big D apostrophe Big A."

"All right. See you."

She went upstairs and I headed for the bar in the hope that a gallon of Johnny Walker might wash away the metallic taste in my mouth. As I reached out to push against the swinging doors, however, I received a brisk surprise. Mirrors—severely vertical ones set in the two-foot-wide doorjambs—revealed the full sweep of the hallway and stairwell behind me. And in one of them, barely visible in the cloakroom's eighteenth-century shadows, I saw two men in what seemed to be hot, whispering debate.

One of them was my old friend, the public library drunk.

And the other was that old friend of the family and pillar of the American Bar Association, Andy Morris.

CHAPTER 7

I was in my office at precisely eight o'clock the next morning, and by 8:03 I had received a call from Miss Zacharias telling me that Balsley Hooten wanted to see me at 8:30. While waiting for that magical moment, I recounted the squares in the air outlet grille and let my curiosity have its rein.

Item: What was it that Balsley Hooten had said the other day that nagged me so? What little word? What passing phrase?

Item: Why would the Armbruster Company be willing to steal a process that made so little difference in the profit column?

Item: Who had put the tail on me, and why?

Item: Why was Andy Morris at The Birches? Why was he arguing with one of the men who made up the tail?

Item: Why did I continue with this farce, when

any sane man would do precisely what Balsley Hooten had told him to do and then go out and get drunk?

Item: What made me think I might be sane?

I sat there, deliberating these questions and trying to forget my loneliness. When I arrived at home last night, sick and full of remorseful second thoughts, Peg had long since left for Nancy's buffet-and-bridge bash and the kids had long since become absorbed in a very adult motion picture which, I decided after watching a few hundred feet, should rightly have been billed as Thursday Move at the Nighties. I'd shooed them both to chores, parrying Suzy's questions as to why the pretty lady in the movie was in bed when the neighbor man came through the window and giving Billy a mild chewing out for not getting at his math sooner. And then, when all was quiet, I had stood by the kitchen sink, nibbling at a corned beef sandwich and listening to the silence of this, my home.

I had suddenly been crushed by this overwhelming loneliness, and the feeling had stayed with me all through the night. It was beyond articulation and so I feigned sleep when Peg came in after midnight. I wanted to sit up and look at her and tell her how awful it was but I just couldn't, and so long after she had turned off the light and breathed the even sounds of the untroubled spouse, I had lain awake, watching the ceiling take on the twilight that precedes the dawn.

And now, in the pewter glare of day, I was still lonely.

And, perhaps, still more resentful.

Maudie poked her pretty head through the door, her orderly teeth gleaming in a smile that would

probably ignite a thousand hearts in the years she had ahead. "Good news, boss," she said in an exaggerated whisper.

"Oh, say it, say it, say it. For God's sake, say it."

"Old LSD missed his plane in Chicago. He won't be in today."

"Whee."

"Mrs. LSD just called and said he'd called her. The only thing he can get a seat on is a Spad or something that arrives at Philly at four-thirty tomorrow afternoon."

"Damn."

Maudie gave me a quizzical look. "Why damn? I thought you would be delighted. We won't have to put up with him until Monday."

"Yeah. But he's getting home in time for his cocktail party. Which, unfortunately, I'm expected to attend."

Balsley Hooten was standing in the same weird crouch before the same big window giving the same dirty look to southern Pennsylvania, and I had that spooky feeling you get when you are certain that something you are doing or about to say is a carbon copy of something you have done or said in that other dimension they always talk about in what Suzy calls "those sinus-fiction movies."

"Good morning," I said.

"You don't really care if I have a good morning or not." He said this without turning.

"Oh, but I do, Mr. Hooten. If you have a good morning then my own chances for a good morning improve."

He glanced at me over a shoulder. "Are you getting fresh?"

"I'm not getting much of anything, Mr. Hooten. That's why I'm glad you asked to see me. I wanted to see you, too. I need some help."

He turned this time and gave me one of his special alligator stares. "Help?" he said. "What kind of help?"

"For starters, the answers to a couple of questions."

"Like what questions?"

"Well, like this one: Has Andy Morris launched litigation to restrain Armbruster Company from continuing its exploitation of the Yenom process?"

I thought it very interesting that a quick but obvious expression flickered across the Big Man's face—a heat lightning that spoke of worry. (Why would such a question worry him?)

"Not as yet," he said, regarding the countryside again. "Morris hasn't decided what to do along those lines. In any event, whether or not we plan legal action is none of your business."

"How come? The way I read it, the courts in general protect trade secrets under the so-called 'unjust enrichment' proviso." I took out my notebook and consulted a page I had tabbed with a paper clip. "According to my digging, there is precedent that shows the courts view a trade secret as something that—and I quote—'may constitute any formula, pattern, device, or compilation of information used in one's business and which gives him an opportunity to obtain an advantage over competitors who do not know or use it.' The courts also have put a lot of weight on evidence that demonstrates how much time, effort, and money have been put into the development of a trade secret, and, if nothing else, someone who snatches a trade secret, and is proved guilty of having done

so, is violating common law—if not a specific statute. Well, if all this is true, why aren't we suing? Such a suit might even reveal the identity of the spy—or how the secret leaked."

Hooten sneered. "So now you're a lawyer, eh?"

"Not at all. I don't know if I'm even reading the books right. But it certainly seems strange to me that Andy isn't all red hot for doing something along those lines."

Our president and majority stockholder did a strange thing. He went to his desk and sat down. I had supposed that he spent his entire day standing by the big window, and to see him sit in a chair was like catching a glimpse of the Loch Ness monster taking a spin on water skis.

"Well, Dexter," he said, making a steeple with his bamboo-like fingers, "such matters soon will be, as far as you're concerned, no more than academic."

"Why, Mr. Hooten?"

"Because," he murmured, "you're fired."

"I'm what?"

"Fired. Canned. Dismissed. Let go. Finished."

I stared at him but it was very difficult to see him. I was blushing, of course, since I always blush when I should be getting pale in the manner of ordinary mortals. And there was a kind of roaring in my head, as if someone behind me had turned on a garden hose and was filling a bucket.

"You will be paid through March, although I want you clear of the premises in two weeks. You have two weeks to phase out of your job. During that interval your dismissal will be held confidential—between you and me. This is so you can prepare the article on the Yenom theft as planned. I want that article. I want it bad enough to put up

with your presence for another two weeks. Two weeks and that's all."

"But why? Why am I fired?"

The steeple reformed into the church proper, and his purr leaped the scale to become the shrilling of an outraged evangelist. "You are a lustful womanizer, that's why."

"I am?"

"You visited The White Birches last night, did you not?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"I detest men who subordinate propriety to evils of the flesh."

"Me, too. But let me explain. I tried to call you about this on Wednesday evening. I've got a plan, and—"

"You've got a plan, all right. You've got a plan to throw over a perfectly good job. It's beyond my comprehension how a man can forsake his work for nothing more than low lights, soft music, mellow drink, and a compliant woman." His gaze came back from its distant focus to drill me like a laser. "You have until March first to clean up your affairs here."

"Even if I hand you the name of your spy in that time?"

He shook his head like a bull shooing flies. "Even if you hand me all of General Motors. I have my image and the image of my firm to consider. Experience shows me that it will take the gossips in this town from ten to fourteen days to learn of, and to make common coin of, your visit to that place. If they were to think I was unaware of a satyr on my staff, I'd become the butt of every joke in the county. I cannot afford that. So I cannot afford you."

My anger was under full throttle now. "All

right. It's an honor and privilege to be fired from this chemistry set your old man gave you. I've got a good job waiting for me." I gathered myself and turned to leave, shoulders back, head high, stomach sick.

"You won't have a job—good, bad, or indifferent—waiting for you anywhere, Dexter," I heard him rumble. "Not when prospective employers ask me for a reference. Who'll hire a man I denounce as a moral degenerate?"

CHAPTER 8

The trouble with me is that it takes trouble to make me honest with myself. I'll go along, working myself deeper into some great bog of self-delusion and ambition, and only when the ooze reaches my chin will I pause for chimera identification and admit how much the klotz I've been. The next day, being Saturday, gave me ample time for this dismal sport.

I arose early, up-tight and weary from a night of struggle with my incipient joblessness and the irony it represented. It had taken me nearly twenty years to recognize and accept the fact that I had married one of those women who should marry no one but successful and thoroughly rooted merchants. For her part, Peg had tried to wait me out, finally falling exhausted from her efforts to knock down the walls in a dreary succession of towns—house walls, store walls, neighbor walls, school

walls, and all the other walls, physical and social, that alienate the eternal transient. It had required her depression, withdrawal, and mention of divorce to awaken me to the fact that I was a failure and that she and the children were all I had and would ever have, daydreams notwithstanding. Panicked and strangely in love all over again, I had steered us into a crash landing in Hootenville and begun a long-range major overhaul. But now, thanks to my reversion to type, the scaffolding of my precious reconstruction had collapsed.

I was indeed a klotz.

After considering and scrapping the seven-thousandth speech with which I might announce our predicament, I gave up and pulled together some raisin toast and black coffee. I retired to the breakfast nook to chomp morosely and watch a rookie snowstorm that fumbled around the distant hills. Thus engaged, I found yet another rationalization: The only place for me to go was on. That is, if I could identify Balsley Hooten's spy in less than two weeks, I would at least have proved to him the good intentions behind my visit to The Birches. Perhaps then he would relent and back me with references in my negotiations with Art Logue and Conklin Industries. It was a cheerless, juvenile hope, to be sure, but it was the only one I had going for me at the time.

A double agent setup is a delicate thing at best, a watchworks of weights and counterweights, sham and countersham. Even in the straightforward Bloody Dove Caper, which I still saw as my blueprint for this current phantasmagoria, the arrangement had been carefully constructed—despite the fact that Munich is a very large city and the role

had had to be played very broad and loud to catch The Other People's attention.

In the Bloody Dove, the major premise had been that a U.S. headquarters officer was being blackmailed into delivering secrets to The Other People. To expose the blackmailer and neutralize the leak, we operated on a second premise: The Other People were greedy and therefore were always looking for more informants, more and more likely sources of information. Consequently I'd had only to pose as a dissolute headquarters officer with a penchant for gambling official funds to suck in the blackmailer. With his interrogation we had been able to poke assorted fingers into the holes he had made in our dike. As I say, routine all the way.

In applying this M.O. to Son of the Bloody Dove Caper, though, I was working under distinct disadvantages. Whereas in Munich I'd had ample time and logistical support, in Hootenville I was frenzied and fundless. Moreover, like a man chewing tobacco when his rich in-laws call, I couldn't bluff and I couldn't hide; either way—to pretend my predicament didn't exist or to pack up and flee town—I'd be committing social and economic suicide.

In the words of Kaiser Wilhelm: *Ach, du lieber . . .*

I was standing at the sink, rinsing my cup and saucer and eyeing the snowstorm, which by now had gained considerable experience, when Peg drifted into the kitchen. She patted a yawn and said, "Hi."

"Howdy-doo. Get a good sleep?"

"No."

"How come?"

"I don't know. I tossed all night."

"You sure were sawing it off when I got up," I said.

"I fell asleep at dawn, or thereabouts."

"That's too bad. Ready for coffee? It's nice and hot."

She watched me pour, her eyes large and solemn. I tried to imagine her expression if I were to reveal at this very moment that I'd been fired and it was a lead-pipe cinch that we'd have to move again.

"What are your plans for the day?" she asked finally.

My depression moved aside so that I might weigh this little surprise. Ordinarily she would tell me what she planned to do with her Saturday and let me make my plans to conform to the chinks in the schedule. I gave her a covert, curious glance, disliking the wariness in me.

"Well, if that nasty weather out there holds off long enough I expect to run downtown and pick up Billy's bike lamp batteries and other things like that there."

She yawned again, then took a sip from her cup. "Like what other things?"

"A can of shaving cream, some razors. Stuff for my overnight kit."

"Overnight kit? Going somewhere?"

"Mm. The printers start to roll on the March number at seven-thirty Monday morning. I'm going to Philly tomorrow evening and stay over so I'll be there on the dot when the mighty presses begin to roll and all that bop. I'll be there all day. But I should be home for dinner Monday night."

"You haven't done that in a long time. Be on hand when they print the magazine, I mean."

I got very busy with a new cup of coffee for

myself. "And I'm starting to feel guilty about it. So I'm going to be there this time."

"Where are you going to stay?"

"I haven't decided yet. The Warwick, maybe."

"Oh."

"What are you going to do today?" I asked as brightly as I could manage. "Buy the dining room suite at Monticello?"

She shrugged, a small motion of a small shoulder. She was very pretty in this light, and I remembered my hot, disloyal thoughts of recent days and was ashamed.

"I don't think I'll do much of anything today," she said. "I don't feel very well."

"That's too bad. Anything I can do for you?"

"No thanks." She took another deliberate sip.

I wondered if I ought to apologize for my taciturnity of last night. I had come home in a state of shock, of course, and she had asked me what was the matter and I'd told her nothing at all and she had shrugged and become carefully polite and distant for the balance of the evening. After wrestling the kids to bed, she had gone wordlessly to bed herself, and I'd sat up, trying to read a pip-pip-and-cheerio detective novel filled with manor houses, drawing rooms, heathered moors, and pipe-chewing inspectors who were always made to look stupid by the young botany professor on vacation from the university at Ham-on-Rye or someplace. But I couldn't keep my mind on the problem, and so I sat in the den until well after midnight, staring unseeingly at the book and feeling terrible.

"Peg," I said. "I'm not much of a husband, am I?"

She glanced at me, and I flattered myself with

the impression that there had been quick disagreement in her eyes.

"What's wrong with you, Dex?"

"Wrong? Nothing's wrong." (Now what in God's world had made me open *this* barrel of worms?)

"I think there is. You've been acting funny lately."

"Oh, a little preoccupied with things at the office, maybe."

She shook her head. "It's more than that. I can tell. What is it?"

I was saved by the bell.

I lifted the phone from its wall hook, striving to hide my relief. "Hello."

"Hi, Dex."

"Oh, Dom. How you doing?"

"O.K. Say, are you alone? I mean can you talk?"

"No."

"Well, then. How about meeting me at O'Malley's about noon. I bear tidings of considerable import and that kind of crap."

"I guess that will be all right. I've got to come downtown anyhow."

"Good." He rang off without further fuss.

"Who was that?" Peg wanted to know.

"Dom," I said, my earlier contrition turning to irritation. It was silly, her pretending she hadn't been listening.

"What's he want?"

"He has some questions about the issue."

"Couldn't he ask you on the phone?"

"Sure. But he wants to spring me to lunch at O'Malley's." I hesitated. "Is there anything I can do for you in the heart of metropolitan Hootenville?"

"No."

I bussed her cheek, put on my hat and coat, went into the garage, fired up the Renault, and disappeared over the horizon.

O'Malley's was a real drugstore. That is to say, it was a store devoted to the preparation and dispensation of prescription drugs and those few patent medicines that retained the stodgy respectability they had acquired in the days of twenty-three skidoo. The place was quietly posh, with wrought-iron lyre-back chairs, marble tabletops, and spotless cases. The scent of medicines predominated in the hushed air, and the hired hands wore unyielding white jackets and expressions of passable good humor. O'Malley's only concession to the times was a marble soda fountain that would, if asked in mannerly fashion, produce coffee and sandwiches—cold cuts and cheeses, of course, whose mildness would not contradict the prophylactic atmosphere so sacred to the management. Since it was Squaresville, none of the vroom-and-pinball set would be found dead in the place, a fact that endeared O'Malley's to elderly businessmen like me.

I was sitting at the fountain, sipping a Coke and trying to understand a *Times* review of the new Robertson play, when Dom came through the polite-sounding door and took up station on the stool next to me. His face was very serious.

"Hi," he said seriously.

"Hi. So what's on your mind?"

Dom lit a cigarette and admired himself in the backbar mirror. He lifted his chin and patted its underside with the back of his hand, then said, "You've been flagged at The Birches."

I traded stares with him in the mirror. "You mean you called me all the way down here to tell me that?"

"Mm-hm. At The Birches you are *persona non grata*, or whatever the French is for un-darn-old-welcome."

"Big deal."

"They didn't like the way you propositioned the D'Arcy broad right there in the main hall."

"Who says?"

"Miss Goodman."

"How did she know what went on in the hall? She was in the library with you."

"Carl saw you. He was in the hall. He told Miss Goodman."

Very curious, this. Carl had been nowhere near the hall. The public library drunk, yes. Andy Morris, yes. But not Carl the doorman. Somebody was putting somebody on. But I decided not to make an issue of it now. So I yawned and said, "So it is to yawn. I have no plans to return to The Birches anyhow."

"Maybe not," Dom muttered. "But there's something you really ought to know."

"What?"

"The D'Arcy dame's got a record, Miss Goodman tells me. That's the main reason The Birches canned her."

"A police record, you mean?"

"Yep."

I smiled. "So what? Every prostie has been picked up by the cops somewhere along the line."

"Not on a charge like the one against D'Arcy."

"What kind of charge is that?"

Dom looked at me in that serious way again. "The original charge," he said, "was murder. She

did time on a reduced charge of manslaughter. She stabbed a customer in a fit of anger."

I thought about this for a time. As I did, however, my mind became taken up with something else: the black Chrysler, which was parked across the street and was reflected in one of O'Malley's shiny showcases.

"Well," I said, "I appreciate your telling me this, Dom. I really do. Because it bears on something I hope you might help me with."

Dom picked up a menu and squinted at the list of uncontradictory cold cuts. "What would that be?"

"Do you know where I can hire some muscle?"

He turned his handsome head ninety degrees and examined my face as if it had just sprouted a checkerboard beard. "You want to hire a *hood*?"

"Yeah."

"Have you popped your bung? First it's shady broads and now it's hoods. What in hell has come over you, anyway?"

"Can you put me on to somebody?"

"Answer my question, goddam it."

"No."

"Why do you want a hood?"

"I'd rather not say. Anyhow, I'm just thinking about hiring one. I'd like to know where I can locate one if I need one, that's all."

"Hoods cost money."

"Just get me a name, will you, Dom?"

"No," Dom said, his expression like set concrete. "I don't know any hoods."

"You know everybody."

"You must be crazy, Dex. Really, I mean. You have a good job, a nice family, a reputation for

being churchy and suburbany. And now you chase doxies and hire hoods. You got to be crazy."

"Now that I'm crazy, how about a name?"

"I'll have somebody call you."

"When?"

"As soon as I find somebody. What do you think I am—a frigging gang chieftain or something?"

"Well, make it real soon, will you?"

One of the starchy countermen materialized across the marble from us and raised his eyebrows politely. We ordered and joined the munch-for-lunch bunch. We talked now and then, but about everything but what was on our minds.

Dom left first, mumbling something about color progs for a church brochure. I was glad he did, because I had been waiting him out.

I went to the pay phone and called Art's Esso Station and asked Piggy Walters, the teen-age man-about-the-garage, to come down and pick up my Renault, which was parked outside O'Malley's and was showing signs of menopause. Then I called a cab and arranged to be picked up at Broad and Hinkley, an intersection that was a block away and in good spying distance of the Chrysler. After another cup of coffee I went out the back way and strode down the service alley to my rendezvous with the hack.

"See that black Chrysler up there near O'Malley's?"

"Nice car," the cabbie said around his toothpick.

"I like it so much I want to see everywhere it goes."

"You a cop?"

"No. I'm a Gestapo agent keeping my union card active."

“Just wondered. You don’t have to get hard about it.”

“Watch the Chrysler, eh?”

In ten minutes Piggy arrived, all piggy-looking in his dirty coveralls and knit cap. He stood by the Renault for a moment, bewildered as usual, until he remembered my custom and found the keys under the front seat. He drove off in a cloud of blue smoke, and it was the public library drunk’s turn to be bewildered.

The Chrysler followed Piggy to Art’s, and the cabby and I followed the Chrysler. After watching bemused as the Renault went up on the grease rack, the man in the black sedan shook his head, pushed back his hat, and drove to Railroad Street, where he parked his car and disappeared into Hefflefinger’s Bar and Grill.

CHAPTER 9

Railroad Street was precisely that—a street that ran alongside the railroad on a roughly east-west course. On the north side was the freight-train marshaling yard, a forlorn snarl of black steel spaghetti sprinkled with boxcars and coal hoppers that stood snow-covered and silent like freezing cattle. The lower side of the street was rimmed by a cliff of grimy buildings with hostile windows and ancient, sooty signs that spoke of Carnival and Mail Pouch Tobacco and Eats and Turkish Bath and Pool Hall. Approximately in the center of this architectural misery was the four-story lump of sagging brick and blistered paint whose ground floor housed Hefflefinger's Bar and Grill and whose upper floors served rites best left unguessed.

I paid off the cab and walked to the entrance, which I went through in a swirl of cold air and grit. The place was so dimly lit and so hung over

with bad Victorian colors I had to blink in a deliberate way before I could see enough to keep from sticking my foot in a spittoon. A fat guy with a dirty shirt and sleeve garters was standing behind the bar, wiping the ersatz mahogany with a rag that could have been clean in 1921. Two other nondescripts huddled at a table near a brooding, antedeluvian jukebox, drinking shots and beers and staring at the flyspecked wall. A big waitress wearing what appeared to be a miniskirted housecoat leaned over a solitaire game at the far end of the bar. There was no sign of my Chrysler pal.

I sauntered up to the bar, looked into the fat, mean little eyes, and said, "Ballantine's."

"Beer or whiskey?" the fat guy wheezed.

"Ale."

He slid a bottle and glass onto the bar in front of me, then rested his enormous keister against the backbar and folded his arms across his belly, pretending not to look me over. I glanced at the glass and decided I'd rather drink from the municipal storm drain. So I took a slug straight from the bottle and was mildly surprised to discover that it was indeed ale.

"Don't you want the glass?" the bartender wanted to know.

"No thanks." I put the exact change on the bar.

The man shrugged, leaned forward over his paunch, picked up the glass, and wiped it with his bar rag before putting it back on the shelf. "You're new around here, Mac," he said. "Ain't seen you in before."

"Just passing through."

"Railroader?"

"No. I'm on the lam."

He looked at me, and so did the waitress. "Oh?" he said guardedly. "The cops after you?"

"No, my wife. She wants me to paint the bathroom."

"Smart guy, huh?"

"Just making a little fun."

"Smart guy."

He went back to his wiping, the waitress went back to her game, and I went back to the bottle. I wondered where my friendly neighborhood Chrysler jockey could be. My watch, a usually reliable source, told me it was 2:05. Since I was due at LSD's cocktail party at 5:30, I couldn't fuss around too long.

I exchanged stares with the barkeep, trying to find a spot in all that flab that might be willing to socialize. One eye dreamed of past glories, but the other showed a glint of curiosity. I winked at this one.

"You serious?" he grunted. "About hiding from your wife, I mean."

"Not really. But if I was home she'd have me painting the bathroom, I guarantee you. If not that, something else."

The bartender nodded somberly, communicating his own exasperation with women. The little eyes came around at me. "What's your line of work, buddy?"

"I'm an author," I said in a flurry of improvisation. "That's one of the reasons I came in. I'm thinking of renting an office to do my writing in. You know—get out of the house. I can't write with a wife bugging me all the time."

"Oh?" the man said carefully.

"Yeah. Anything to rent upstairs?"

The porcine eyes went opaque, and he began to

wipe the bar again, a special industriousness in the motion. "I'm all rented up," he said sullenly.

"I'd pay real good."

"I'm already clearing a hundred bucks a week after overhead."

I whistled softly. "Who are your tenants, by the way?"

I saw at once that I had overreached. The barkeep's puffy face took on a sudden wariness, and he turned to move some bottles here and there on the backbar. "I don't ask who they are," he muttered.

I gulped some ale, exhaling appreciatively at gulp's end. "Well," I said, "I don't mean to sound nosy, Mr. Hefflefinger—"

"Schwartz. Hefflefinger was my father-in-law. (The old bastard.)"

Nodding, I pretended interest in this absorbing piece of history. "I see. Well, listen, Mr. Schwartz, would you mind very much if I went upstairs and looked around a bit? Just in case something opens up and you want a new tenant? I'll only be a minute."

Another sudden change came over the bloated features. I recognized it as amusement. It disappeared almost at once. "Yeah," Schwartz said. "Why don't you just try that?"

"O.K." I put another quarter on the bar, contributing a tip that would make this week's net \$100.25. "I'll just duck up the back stairs. See you, Mr. Schwartz."

The big belly rolled with a grunt of doubtful laughter. "Yeah. Maybe."

I went down the hall at the rear of the place, smiling cheerily at the big waitress, who came to the surface of her solitaire to stare after me, weari-

ly droll, as I stepped around her and mounted the creaky stairs. I had reached the second-floor landing and was wondering why everybody was so tickled by the idea of my going upstairs when I found out why.

A hand like a concrete cello came out of the gloom to gather up a yard or so of my topcoat and lift me, toe dancing, across the hall and up against the wall. I'm not what you'd call a big man, but I'm also no shrimp, and so it was with some surprise that I found myself staring straight into the other guy's tie clasp. I mean he was the biggest individual I'd seen this side of statuary. And the meanest-looking.

"All right, Clyde," he said in a hoarse whisper, "how do you like your bounces? Down the stairs on your head, or ass-first out a window? We're havin' a special on both today."

"Take your hand off me," I snarled through one of my buttonholes.

"Oh, I will, Clyde, I will. When I'm danglin' you out the window, that is."

"Are you asking for trouble, mister?"

His eyes, which protruded from his massive head like a pair of greased doorknobs, registered mock horror. "Oh, heavens, no. I'm just naturally curious about what you're doing here. Please don't be angry with me. I couldn't *stand* that."

"Let me go, you hear?" I slammed a heel against one of his shins. He didn't even blink.

"It's all right, Bruce. You can let him down now." The voice drifted serenely down the corridor. "You can release him now."

"He just walked up the stairs, Mr. Stokes," the big man wheezed, his eyes unwavering in their study of mine. "No word, no nothin'. He just

walked up the stairs." He said this with the wounded air of a man who has been grossly put upon.

"It's all right. Let him come to the office."

The sausage-like fingers uncurled from my coat and I took up breathing again. I made a business of restoring my clothes to order, delivering Bruce the dirtiest look I could manufacture with the face I had available. Then I strolled down the hall with as much dignity as I could assemble and entered the door from which the voice had come.

The room would never rate a spread in *House Beautiful*. The only thing to recommend it was a window which gave a narrow view of the Reading Railroad water tower and a corner of Hymie's Junkyard. The rest made do with a few rickety chairs, a bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling, and a desk so dusty it looked moss-covered. There was a phone on this, and behind the phone, seated in a swivel chair, was a dusty old man in a dusty derby. He was showing his false teeth in a grin, but his eyes were as hard and cold as a policeman's buttons.

"How do you do?" he said in a peculiar, windy voice. "I'm Harlan Stokes."

"Hi. Paul Dexter."

"Cold day."

"You bet."

"Sit down, won't you? Nice of you to drop in."

"I was darned near dropped out, too, thanks to that sweetheart in the hall." I sank onto the marble-hard chair.

"Bruce?" Stokes chuckled. "I apologize for Bruce. But a man with as many, ah, interests as I have is all too frequently bothered by cranks and malcontents. I retain Bruce Peebles as a, well, sort of receptionist."

"I hate to think of what happens to those callers you don't rescue," I said, straightening my tie.

"Actually, Bruce has been a considerable blessing lately," Stokes said confidentially. "That fool Schwartz downstairs has become uncharacteristically ambitious. He's rented the third floor to some rather unsavory out-of-town operators who seem to be setting up a girlie service. Bruce helps to keep my office wing free of the odd clods who wander up and down the stairs."

"Oh? That's strange. Schwartz told me just now he isn't about to rent anything."

"He isn't," Stokes said. "He knows how displeased I am about the girlie-service thing. Schwartz is a congenital liar but on this renting thing he's telling the truth. There'll be no more room at Hefflefinger's inn. I have so decreed."

"These people: they're actually running a house upstairs?"

"Oh, no. Just a headquarters, I think. A couple of slick types. They come and go. Very tiresome."

There was a pause, and then Stokes folded his hands and regarded me with a revised smile. "So," he said. "Who are you, Mr. Dexter? And why were you prowling about?"

"I wasn't prowling about. I was looking for somebody."

"Oh? Who?"

"I don't know his name. I saw him come in downstairs. One of those types you see getting the hots for the dames on TV who use the right mouthwash or something. You know: guys in sharp threads who have faces you never remember."

"I see. Are you a policeman?"

"Don't be silly."

"I didn't think so. Otherwise I'd have recognized

you." He paused. Then: "I believe I know the man you're talking about. He's a cheap grifter who freelances in petty blackmail. These days he also runs errands for the girlie service upstairs."

"Does he have a name?"

Stokes grinned. "What's in a name, Mr. Dexter?"

"Think it would do me any good to look around upstairs?"

"No good at all," Stokes said, shaking his head. "It's only an office. Even so, they keep an armed man on twenty-four-hour watch there. It would not only do you no good, it could get you killed."

I nodded. "Well, then, how about another question? One that goes like this: Who are you, Mr. Stokes?"

He showed his Woolworth teeth and made a faint little laughing sound. "I'm a businessman, Mr. Dexter. I deal in esoteric services."

"Like girls?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I have nothing but contempt for those who prey on women and satyrs. It's the world's oldest profession because it's the easiest. I am a man of skill and knowledge, Mr. Dexter, not a grubby purveyor of orgasm."

I peered at him narrowly and decided to go for broke. "I might be in the market for some babysitters. Or isn't that worthy of your skill, either?"

A knowing light came into the little man's coin-like eyes. "Ah," he said, "so you plan to kidnap someone."

"Not kidnap in the usual sense. I'm merely thinking about putting a citizen on ice for several days—a week at most."

"And when he's released? What then?"

I brushed some dust from the skirt of my top-

coat. "Nothing, that's what. This citizen I have in mind is the very last one to go running to the police. He would pout a good bit, but he wouldn't call the fuzz."

"Baby-sitting fees are very high these days," Stokes purred. "Primarily because it can be so easily viewed as kidnapping—a very serious Federal offense."

"Like how high?" I said cautiously.

"It depends on the risk, the difficulties, the time span, and so on."

I nodded. "Sure. But your major consideration in this case would be the time span. I assume the risk and confront the difficulties. I myself will deliver the citizen to your baby-sitters at any location you name."

He gave me a thoughtful stare. "Oh," he said finally, "you'd want only to buy room and board, then?"

"That's right."

Stokes rested back in the swivel chair and consulted the ceiling. "Well," he drawled, "that should be fairly easy to arrange. Room and board in such a case would come to a thousand dollars a day."

I swallowed and said, "Sounds reasonable."

Stokes's eyes came back to the horizontal and regarded me with approval. "One thing about you, Mr. Dexter: You're a man of decision. No jockeying for an improved position. Just yes or no. I like that in a man. Shows strength of character."

"And a fat wallet."

"Ha-ha. Yes. That, too."

"One other question, Mr. Stokes: How much would it cost me to rent Little Boy Blue out there in the hall?"

Stokes raised his steel-wool eyebrows. "Well,

Bruce would involve an extra fee, of course. On top of the room and board."

"Of course. How extra?"

"Three hundred a day and expenses."

"I'm going to lose a little of my strength of character, Mr. Stokes, and jockey for an improved position. I'll start by saying you're out of your cotton-picking mind."

"That's the fee, Mr. Dexter," he murmured. "Take it or leave it."

"I can rent a photographer from *Life* magazine for two-fifty a day and expenses. And he'll shoot color to boot."

Stokes rubbed the knuckles of a speckled fist against his speckled lapel. "And," he said blandly, "I can rent a fancy house for two-fifty a month. So what does that prove? You want to rent Bruce, you pay a Bruce-type fee."

"What do you mean by expenses, by the way?"

"Well," Stokes said, "if he has to take a bus, you pay the fare. If he's hungry, you buy the meal. That kind of thing."

"And if he fires his pistol I buy the cartridge, I suppose," I said sourly.

Stokes shook his head and the derby wobbled. "Oh, no, Mr. Dexter. No pistol is included in Bruce's fee. If he carries a pistol, there's an additional charge."

"Oh, come on. You must be joking."

"Not so. Fifty dollars a day for a handgun. A hundred for a rifle or shotgun—regulation or sawed off—and two hundred for a submachine gun. Those are the going rates anywhere on the East Coast."

"Sheesh."

"I know it's high," Stokes said sympathetically, "but, you see, my costs keep rising, too."

"Well, all right, then. I'll take one Bruce Pebbles with one pistol. No white sidewalls, no automatic transmission, no radio or heater."

Stokes nodded the salesman's conclusive nod. "Very well. Would you care to pay cash, or would you rather set up a charge account? We will carry your fees at ten percent interest compounded weekly, should you want to buy our services on time."

"No thanks. I'll pay cash."

"Fine, fine. Tell you what I'll do, Mr. Dexter. I'll ask only that you put down a binder of a thousand dollars, due when Bruce reports for work. We'll tally your final bill after our work for you is done."

"Gee, that's neat."

"Now: You have an address, a phone?"

I shook my head and said, "Sorry."

"Oh," he said. "Very well. When will your activity begin?"

"I don't know yet. I'll have to call you. Do I get you at Hefflefinger's?"

"Mm. Call the bar. Tell Cleo—she's the barmaid—you want to talk to me. Leave your number. I'll call you back. Agreed?"

"Agreed, Mr. Stokes."

Outside the wind had picked up, and I pulled my coat collar close about my throat and bent to the task of reaching the cabstand at the railroad station, blinking away the tears that cold wind always brings to my eyes. Somewhere a locomotive thudded and clanked, and there was the smell of oil and coal smoke.

I paused to resettle my hat and adjust my scarf when a dry board cracked in the air beside my head. The snapping was followed by the dull sound

of brick chunks skittering across the ice-veneered sidewalk.

One thing about being an ex-soldier: You know a shot when you hear one.

I looked at the brick wall and its bright new scar and decided that the bullet must have come from that alley down there. I did my looking and deciding in about one-thousandth of a second.

I ran to the alley, hearing a car motor vroom somewhere.

I arrived in time to see the stern of a car swing in a wild skid and disappear behind the building at the far end of the alley. The vooming dwindled down what must have been Tinker Street.

The stern of a car is hard to identify when it's skidding and kicking up snow.

But not when it's a yellow Jeep Wagoneer.

A yellow Jeep Wagoneer like Andy Morris's.

CHAPTER 10

Old LSD lived in Quaker Hills, a development sufficiently posh to escape the look of a development. The fact that there wasn't a Quaker to be found within forty miles didn't count; Quaker Hills was hilly, by God, which was more than you could say for Mountain Vista, the subdivision across town that sat on five hundred acres of red clay and proffered a horizon of utility poles and factory stacks.

Despite the slippery streets, we had taken the station wagon because Peg felt the Renault was too unprepossessing to mix with the Caddies and Buicks and Mercedes-Benzes that were sure to be clustered in the LSD driveway circle. So I parked among the VW's and Volvos and other snow-disdaining vehicles the rich people had elected to drive and we walked mutely to the front door of the house, which spread among the trees like a

fieldstone ocean liner in dry dock. A smoothie in a brass-buttoned butler suit answered our ring and crooned good evening to the Lawrence Welk-type music that burbled over his shoulder. We gave him our coats and put on our gosh-isn't-this-fun faces and headed for the laughter and humidity and clinking glass sounds that boiled from an archway at the end of the long center hall. We stood at the top of some stairs, peering into a sunken living room that was awash in red faces, frozen grins, and polite little lies. A chiffon gown with Mrs. LSD in it peeled off from the main formation and soared toward us in a climbing turn.

"Oo," she gushed, "how lovely. The Dexters have arrived at last."

"Mrs. Drew." I nodded and managed a grin. "Nice of you to have us."

"And, Peggy, my dear: How delicious you look this evening." Mrs. LSD's enthusiasm was borne on the winds of her last martini. She beamed at me and, in a conspiratorial aside to Peg, said, "What a doll you have for a husband, Peggy, darling. Better keep a close watch on him this evening."

I made a little bow and said, "You can reassure the ladies, Mrs. Drew: I'm perfectly harmful."

Peg gave me a dirty look, but Mrs. LSD was squinting around the room. She waved and hooted. "Leslie, dear. Oh, Leslie. The Dexters are here."

Old LSD waddled out of the crowd, holding a drink in one hand and, with the other, guiding the elbow of an angular, brooding man who sported a mop of white hair and a splash of black moustache. They met us at the foot of the stairs.

"Good evening, my boy," LSD rumbled at me without joy.

We shook hands and I introduced Peg. LSD

nodded toward the moustache. "Barnaby Vernon, public relations chief of the U.S. Army Missile Propellant Center," he said. Then to Vernon: "This young man is my assistant."

"Oh?" said the moustache.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Vernon," I said.

"Oh?"

"I'm looking forward to the day I can visit your center."

"Oh?"

"It must be a fascinating place to work."

"Oh?"

I sent an appealing glance Mrs. LSD's way. "There's a rumor that you have a still in the cellar."

"Oo. How silly of me. Please. This way."

We followed her, and I vowed privately never to buy a guided missile from Barnaby Vernon.

En route to the bar, Peg and Mrs. LSD were waylaid (horrid term) by three gasping, eye-rolling women who had probably spent the afternoon at the club together but now acted as if they hadn't seen each other since the Boxer Rebellion. Old LSD and his talkative missile-maker buddy were snagged by a knot of men composed of what I recognized to be an insurance tycoon, a realtor, a judge, a police superintendent, a gynecologist, and a Cadillac dealer. Which left me on my own. Which delighted me no end.

A bartender gave me my light Scotch and I was in business.

I saw Bill Liggett's head and shoulders bouncing buoylike above the sea of haircuts and coiffures and our eyes met. He winked and I waved my glass. Bill was advertising and sales promotion manager for Klein Screw Company, a local outfit

that netted about a million and a half on sales of nuts, bolts, and screws. He elbowed his way toward me, his usually goodnatured face oddly strained.

"Hi, Bill. You look sort of blue. Have a drink on me."

"I don't drink, Dex."

I looked at him. "You kidding me?"

His long head wagged and he chuckled. "No, I'm not kidding. Every Friday night—come mud, blood, hurricane, or earthquake—I'm down at the Frisbee Street clubhouse, listening to other members of the Hootenville AA tell me what the hell happened to me and why. A lot happened to me, incidentally. Very little of which I remember today."

"Is this why you look blue? All the guzzling going on around you right now?"

He humphed. "Hell, no. Eleven years of sobriety I got. I can stand up to my prat in booze and not have it bother me. No, I'm worried about something else right now."

"What's that?"

He sighed. "As you know, Dexter-laddie, I handle PR for our modest little firm. This morning I took a modest little news release to the *Clarion*. It was a story of how our management has offered the company stockholders a tour of our plant." He paused and shuddered.

"Didn't the *Clarion* run the piece?"

"Yes, it did, I'm sorry to say. Haven't you seen the paper?"

"Not yet. What went wrong?"

Liggett shuddered again. "The headline went wrong, that's what went wrong. The story was there, all right. Just the way I wrote it. But the copydesk put on a headline that read: "Manage-

ment Makes Offer to Screw Company Stockholders.' ”

“Ah, well. There’ll be another day, Bill.”

He shuddered again, squared his shoulders, thrust out his chin, and strode off into the nicotine twilight.

I moved to the lee of a nasty-looking plant that probably ate unwary dogs. As I alternately sipped and sulked, somebody sauntered up and touched my arm. It was Alexander Fitch, feature writer and business columnist for the *Hootenville Clarion* and stringer for assorted trade publications.

“Well, well,” he said in his narrow-nosed way, “if it isn’t the traitor.”

“Hi, Fitch. What’s with the traitor jazz?”

He smiled a lopsided smile and said, “You were once an honest-to-God newspaperman. You are now a whore who writes propaganda for Hooten. That makes you a traitor.”

“And you,” I said, “are a whore who writes propaganda for all the little businessmen who send you free tickets and whiskey and TV sets for putting their names in your crappy little column.”

Fitch nodded agreeably. “Mm. It is a crappy little column, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“But the loot’s good.”

“So’s Hooten’s.”

We traded grins that signaled a truce. I hadn’t had too much professional truck with Al, since press relations were usually mauled by Old LSD himself. But our paths had crossed now and then—mainly those times when LSD had told me to hand-carry a release to the *Clarion* city desk—and we’d hit it off pretty well from the start. The thing

I liked about him most, I suppose, was his utter lack of hypocrisy; he would do anything for a buck, or a free ticket, or free whiskey, or free TV sets, and readily and happily admitted it. He would also do anything for some poor slob in trouble—newspaper guys are among the softest touches in the world, and Al led the pack. No fooling: I had seen him give a five-spot to a canned-heat drunk who wandered into the city room one day, trying to sell a Silver Star he'd earned in an earlier, soberer, Hürtgen Forest day.

As some poor slob in trouble, I had another reason to be glad to see him now, however.

"You get around a good bit on your business beat, Al. Maybe you can give me a line on something. I need the name of a guy."

"What guy?"

"The patent attorney for Armbruster Company down Baltimore way."

"Well, the name you want is on an organization chart I have in my third desk drawer under an old apple core and a sheaf of pornographic pictures. But you're wasting your time. If you want to talk law with Armbruster, you've got to talk to their chief legal beagle: Hamilton McCorkle. He's got seven lawyers on his staff—from patent types to right-of-way artists—but he does all the talking for all of them."

"You have an organization chart for Armbruster?"

"I have an organization chart for every business of a hundred employees or more within a hundred miles of here," he said smugly. "I'm a stringer correspondent for seven trade publications, a weekly news magazine, and a wire service. To do this

job well, I have to know who's on first. I do this job very well, incidentally."

He drained off a highball that was not much darker than a cherry Coke, dabbed his thin lips with a paper napkin, and said, "By the way—you can do me a favor, Dexter."

"Was ist das?"

"I plan to do a piece on the use of Hooten products down at the Army Missile Propellant Center. I've got a general O.K. from that ninny, Barnaby Vernon, as well as gushing assurances from LSD that you will be only too happy to accompany me down there. Will you be only too happy to accompany me down there?"

"It had better be within the next two weeks," I said gloomily.

"I'll be out to see you. We'll talk about it then, eh?"

"Sure."

Somebody called Fitch's name above the din and he glanced over his shoulder and waved. He gave me a Prussian bow and, with no further comment, disappeared into Party Time U.S.A.

I was staring after him when the three large women, still gasping and rolling their eyes, cruised past arm-in-arm. Their eyes held steady and their breath suspended just long enough to give me a thoroughgoing inspection and then they put their heads together and giggled like sorority sisters sharing a traveling salesman joke. They were followed shortly by a little blonde in a dressy shift and a fat brunette in a shifty dress. These, too, looked me up and down, giggled, and passed on. The fat one looked back over her shoulder, winked suggestively, and giggled again.

I was amusing the hell out of everybody tonight.

"Ah," a voice said behind me, "if it isn't William Randolph Hearse."

"Oh, hi, Andy," I said, wishing I could ask him if it was he who had shot at me this afternoon.

"Why are you standing off in ambush like this? Why aren't you out in the crowd, fawning over LSD? It might get you promoted." When he grinned in that easy way, I found it difficult to believe what I was beginning to believe about him.

"Actually," I said confidentially, "I'm talent-scouting for Warner Brothers."

"The movie people?"

"No. The brassiere company."

He took a sip of his drink and considered the crowd, and I could see he was preoccupied. Worried, maybe. I wondered why. So I asked him. "You look worried. Why?"

Andy stared into his glass for a moment, a faint flush climbing from under his starched white collar. "Worried? Not me." He changed the subject. "How are you coming on the industrial security article for *Plastimes*?"

I was tempted to confront him with my knowledge of his presence at The Birches. But I decided against it. I was convinced that Andy didn't know I knew, and therefore I sensed that to bring up the subject would be to throw away a trump. So I said, "Not so good. I have a lot of digging to do yet, I fear."

"Need any help, just ask."

"Sure."

"How's Peg?" There was a subtle pressure behind the seemingly casual question. Again I wondered why.

"Fine. She's zooming around this dogfight somewhere. Is Minah here?"

He shook his head solemnly. "No. Bad cold. She told me to come anyhow and fawn over old Hooten-Nanny. She wants me to get a promotion."

"Balsley Hooten is here?"

"Dex, my boy, Balsley Hooten is everywhere." As he said this, he glanced beyond my right shoulder and his eyes widened perceptibly. "Speaking of the devil," he said under his breath.

I turned to utter a reflexive lie. "Oh, hello, Mr. Hooten. Nice to see you."

The Big Man gave me a stare that had all the cordiality of a shotgun muzzle. "Hmph."

"Nice party," I suggested, lacking anything better to suggest.

"I hate these things," Hooten announced.

"Me, too. How about you, Andy? Don't you hate these things, too?"

"Oh, my, yes. Indeed I do."

Hooten kept his yellow eyes affixed to mine, but when he spoke there was no doubt that he was talking to Andy. "Would you leave us, please?"

Andy knew a hint when he saw one. He nodded gravely, pretended to discover somebody who delighted him in the medium distance, and walked off, his face a bright pink.

Hooten grumped, "What are you doing here?"

"Trying unsuccessfully to get drunk on my host's booze."

"You have only two weeks, you know. Why aren't you working on my article?"

"I can't see any future in it."

"You're a sullen wretch," he said without emphasis.

"Yeah. But there are times when I'm not nearly so nice."

"You'd better watch your tongue, Dexter."

"Gee, that's right. I wouldn't want to get a fellow down on me after he's been nice enough to fire me without a hearing, brand me a moral degenerate, and promise to blackball me in my trade." I wished my face weren't so red and my hands would stop trembling.

"What else do you expect?" Hooten said. "On two separate occasions this evening I've heard women whispering about you. You need any more proof of the absurd position you've put me in, thanks to your lecheries?"

I tried not to snort. "If you had just listened to me and what I had in mind, you might have given me a raise. Now will you excuse me, please? I'm scheduled to rape a few ladies on the front lawn."

As I turned to go, he said, "Dexter."

"Well?"

"Your own behavior compelled me to fire you. This distresses me."

"You should see it from here."

"I had hopes for you. You seemed to be the only community-relations man I had who has any sense."

"You had only two community-relations men."

"That's what I said."

I was debating the proper answer to this when a mousey woman with salt-and-pepper hair and eyes like wet stones materialized at our elbows. This, I recognized from her newspaper photos, was Mrs. Hooten.

"Well, good evening, Mrs. Hooten," I said, striving to be once again the perfect suburban gentleman. "Nice party, eh?"

"Balls," she said.

"Why, Mrs. Hooten. Such a thing to say."

"I was speaking to my husband, young man."

"Oh. Heh-heh."

"Balls," she said, "it's time to go."

"You're telling me?" he said. "I was ready to go before I got here."

On the way home I was very conscious of Peg's scrutiny—a sidewise probing of eyes from the dark. After a time it got to me.

"Why are you staring at me?" I tried to sound the proper tone of nonchalance.

"I was wondering what I might have been missing in you," she said, her voice remote.

"What do you mean by that?"

"For some reason you were very much in the female conversation this evening. The consensus seems to be that you're a cross between George Bernard Shaw and Errol Flynn."

I sighed one of my silent sighs. So it was emerging already. Balsley Hooten had given the gossips ten days to two weeks. And already they were in the bullpen, warming up. Since, as the old saying has it, the wife is always the last to know, I estimated that at this rate Peg would learn of my visit to The Birches just about the time she got the wonderful news that I had been fired and we would be moving again.

Oddly enough, I found myself unable to care.

"Well, I'm glad to know the ladies approve," I said inanely. "But I've got news for them: I'm a one-woman man."

To my surprise, Peg said nothing further. It was always a surprise when Peg said nothing further.

CHAPTER 11

The snowstorm had moved east to punish Bucks County and the Jersey mountains, leaving a rear guard of solid nimbus that tinted Sunday afternoon a melancholy slate color. Which was quite fitting, as far as my state of mind was concerned. I'd foregone church, primarily because I couldn't justify my plans for the evening with Pastor Holloway's announced intention to preach on "Deceit and Duplicity—the Curse of Mankind." So I pleaded a headache (which was no lie) and sent off Peg and the kids with vague instructions to say hello to everybody.

In the rump of the afternoon I called Andy Morris.

"Hello?"

"Hi," I said. "You have a TV voice."

"Oh—Dex. Hi. Yeah. I'm dozing over two politicians lying like hell on 'Watchdogs of the Press.' "

“Sorry to bother you at home, but I’m still kicking around this security article and have run into a couple of blanks.”

He went to considerable trouble to articulate a yawn. “It’s all right. What kind of blanks?”

“Where does the average company—an outfit like Hooten—keep its secrets filed? I mean, there’s got to be some kind of repository for confidential data and process descriptions, for patent applications and so on. So where is this in a typical company like Hooten?”

He humphed. “Hooten is neither average nor typical, my boy. But in this respect it follows general industrial procedure. Key business records are usually classified in descending order of importance—from absolutely necessary to important to helpful to noncritical. And which papers go into which category is decided by top management; that is, Balsley Hooten and his department directors. The absolutely necessary records—which include a whole schmeer of items from accounts payable through R and D and engineering and manufacturing data to sales info, licenses, and franchises—are duplicated and dispersed. Working copies are kept in departmental files, while microfilm copies are placed in special storage vaults at widely dispersed areas to avoid a complete collapse of the business in case of fires, explosions, riots, and that jazz. And—”

I broke in. “But how about the single most comprehensive point of storage? Is there such a place? For trade secrets and inventions, particularly?”

Andy spoke through another yawn. “I suppose you might say that R and D and the Patent Division would fill that bill. Of course, in R and D, critical info is scattered all over the lot because

each man works on a specific project and usually maintains his own locked files. But in the Patent Division everything comes together, because a patent application sums up—condenses in black and white—all the razzledazzle the R and D boys have gone through to bring an item or a process to patentable condition. Naturally, the lawyers, the staffers, the patent draftsmen—all those people who work in the Patent Division—keep their chunks of business locked up in their files, too. But the chief patent attorney, like me, for instance, has a master file of status reports that gives a pretty absolute picture of everything that's going on in the division." He paused and made a sound that came across as sipping, and I assumed he was working on a beer.

"I see," I said in my sincere way. "So R and D and Patent really carry a special burden when it comes to security."

"You bet, laddie. At Hooten, for example, nobody—but nobody—who ain't authorized gets near the security files of R and D and Patent. Especially Patent."

"Can you give me any idea of how those files are protected?"

"No."

"Well, why not?"

"To tell you would be to ruin their security value."

"Oh. You mean electronic gismos, TV cameras—hardware like that?"

"Well, we aren't Fort Knox or the Pentagon. Some of the big companies can afford that kind of gingerbread, sure. But not outfits like us. We make do with guards and procedures."

I hesitated, then asked carefully. "Andy, are you

planning any litigation against Armbruster? To make them cease and desist on the Yenom thing?"

There was a period of silence while he thought that one over. I had known there would be.

"Well," he said in an odd voice, "no. Not yet, anyhow."

"Why?"

"Legal secret. I can't tell you," he said quickly.

"Seems sort of queer—everybody bellyaching about those rotters down at Armbruster but nobody doing anything about it."

"If we decide to take it to court, Community Relations—meaning you, Dexter—will be among the first to know about it."

"Mm. Well—"

"I just can't say anything more along those lines, that's all. Just don't push into this area, Dex. It won't do you any good." His voice had suddenly become hard enough to crack hickory nuts.

"O.K., O.K. Don't split your gasket. I was just wondering."

"Anything else?"

"Only one thing: How about the security down at the Army Missile Propellant Center in Maryland? Is it good?"

There was no more pausing. He came right back with his flinty voice: "You can forget that. The Army has that place, and everything in it, under a very heavy blanket." He coughed. "Look, Dex, for a magazine jockey you're asking some mighty irrelevant—even impertinent—questions. It's really none of your business, and certainly not part of any article, what I've been doing about Yenom. Why don't you knock it off?"

"Sorry, Andy. I don't mean to be too nosy. But—"

"Don't be, then. Just stick to your job and let me do mine, eh?"

"Sure, sure. But it's hard to tell where mine leaves off and yours begins."

"Not for me, it isn't. Yours left off when you started asking about document control. Now bug off, will you? I've got a program to watch."

"All right. Sorry to bother you. See you next week."

"Good-bye."

After he had hung up I stood for a time, staring at the phone. That, I told myself, should do just fine. That should get my old pal Andy Morris off-balance, sure enough.

I even laughed.

The Happy Hour Motel was out on Route 103. It was a pink stucco arrangement that rambled this way and that and tried to look Spanish. On one flank was a gas station and on the other was a large open field studded with billboards and old, very used beer cans. It was not the kind of place to take the wife and kids while traveling to see Aunt Bessie. But it was precisely the right place to take a very good friend for a happy hour or two.

Pretending to inspect the place, I let the rented Chevy decelerate. The red Impala that had followed us from the train station, going too fast to slow down graciously, went on past. I strained for a glimpse of the occupants, but the lights of on-coming traffic reduced them to fleeting silhouette. I didn't bother to note the license plate number, since it probably was phony.

Three cars dotted the motel parking area: a junker of a Ford, a nondescript Olds, and a

custard-colored Mustang. Each bore a Pennsylvania tag.

"What's that tune you keep whistling?" Miss D'Arcy asked.

"Tune?"

"Yeah. You been whistling that tune ever since you got in the car. Through your teeth, like."

"It's an old battle hymn. It's called 'Hertzing Matilda.'"

"Aw, go on." She jerked her head toward the motel. "This the one you want?"

"Look O.K. to you?"

"Sure. A motel's a motel. See one, you seen them all."

I pulled off the road and braked the Chevy to a halt on the frozen cinders outside the office. Before I went in I peered up the road, but there was no further sign of the Impala.

A bushy-haired man with a pudgy, indifferent face and polka-dot suspenders over his T-shirt was sitting behind the counter. He was reading *Mad* magazine and he was not having a good laugh. He was not the kind to have a good laugh over anything, unless it was World War Three.

"Yeah?" he said, without looking up.

"I'd like a room."

"Single or double?"

"Double."

"We ain't got no vacancies."

"Only three cars in your lot," I pointed out.

"O.K., so each one of 'em had twelve passengers."

"Ho, ho, ho. You're a card, all right. You get those funny lines out of that magazine?"

He did not look at me.

I took out a twenty-dollar bill and snapped it.

He looked at me.

"How long will you be stayin'?" he said.

"One night."

"Twenty bucks. In advance. And you got to have luggage."

"We have luggage."

He yawned noisily, stood up slowly, threw down the magazine, scratched his pot, then stooped down to reach behind the counter. He came up with a cardboard suitcase that looked as if it had carried four stevedores over Niagara Falls. "Not this kind, you don't," he wheezed. "Five bucks extra for the luggage."

I put a five on top of the twenty. He took the bills from my fingers with an indolent swing of his dirty hand and said, "Leave the suitcase in the room when you take off. And don't bust up no furniture." He scooped a key from the wall rack and slid it at me. "Number Eight."

"Do you want me to register or anything?"

He flipped open a ledger book and handed me a ball-point pen whose flanks acclaimed the Hootenville Lumber Company. "Sure," he said, "if it'll make you feel better."

I signed the register Mr. and Mrs. Frank N. Stein.

The room was no more than what you'd expect: a bed, a night table, two unfriendly chairs, a pair of bargain basement lamps, a dresser and vanity with speckled mirrors, a closet big enough to accommodate three handkerchiefs, and a bath with a stall shower and cracked tile.

Miss D'Arcy took off all her clothes and flopped on the bed.

"What's the matter with you?" she wanted to know.

"Matter?" I managed.

"Aren't you going to take your hat off?"

"Oh. Yes." I took my hat off.

"And why are you that color? You strangling or something?"

"No. But aren't you a bit chilly, Tillie?"

"Me? Hell, no. I spend most of my time with my clothes off. Doctor friend a mine says I'm acclimated."

"Oh."

"Well, what you standing there like that for? Don't you like me?"

"You're just fine."

"Well, come on, then."

"Miss D'Arcy," I said, seeking a confidential tone, "I have a confession to make."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I—I'm not like other men."

Miss D'Arcy sighed and reached for her purse, which she hed flung on the night table. "Oh, brother," she said, resignedly. "I knew there was something fishy about you. I just knew it." She opened the purse and produced a switch job whose blade was only a few inches longer than a cavalry sword.

"You try one funny thing with me, buster, and you're an instant soprano."

I held up a hand of reassurance. "No, Miss D'Arcy. Don't worry, please. I promise you I won't even come near you."

"What the hell's with you, buster?" She looked worried anyhow.

"I simply want to spend some time in this room with you, that's all."

"Doing what?"

"Nothing. You want a drink? I'll make you a drink. You want to read? I brought some maga-

zines. You want to take a nap? Be my guest."

Her eyes, two dots of purple in the dingy light, went up and down my frame as if she were examining a squid in the municipal aquarium. After a moment she laughed, a hard and nasty sound. "Oh. Now I get it. You get your funksies hanging around a room with a bare babe. That it?"

"Something like that."

"Well," she said, shrugging a peach-hued shoulder, "it takes all kinds, I guess. But it's still a hundred bucks, understand?"

"Sure. It's worth it."

She made a sound of disgust and returned the knife to her purse.

I turned off the lights and peeped through the blinds. Going on outside was nothing. Lots of it. Once a tractor trailer boomed down the road, a big clump of lights and clatter in the icy night. Then, a few minutes later, a car pulled in for gas at the station down the way. There were some muffled voices, a slamming of doors, the far-off ring of a cash register, and the eventual departure of the car. The lights of the gas station went out.

I sat there for a long time, watching the subsequent nothing.

Matilda's voice had a sleepy sound.

"You waiting for something?"

"I'll say."

"You're a creep."

"Yeah."

I heard the bedsprings squeak when she fluttered the covers and arranged herself for a long night.

How he did it I'll never know.

One moment I was waiting there, peering out at the frigid night and listening to the keening wind and a metal sign banging somewhere. The next mo-

ment the door had swung open, the lights glared, and a pistol muzzle was caressing my left ear.

"Don't twitch an eyelash, sweetie," a soft hoarse voice advised me.

"I wouldn't give it a thought. And that's a fact," I said.

"What the hell's going on?" Matilda demanded from her bed.

"Shut up," the voice growled. "And stay in that sack."

I concentrated very hard on keeping my eyelashes from twitching. The eyelashes were my only problem. The rest of me was frozen stiff.

"Stand up, pal. And go to the bed. Easy and slow."

I did it just the way he would want it.

"Now sit down beside the dame."

"What do you want, you dirty crud?" Miss D'Arcy snapped.

"I said shut up, sister. And I mean shut up."

The vanity mirror gave me my first look at our caller. It was Carl, the doorman at The Birches, who in reverse image was even larger and uglier than I remembered.

I said nothing. The business end of a .45 Colt has always served to dull the brilliance of my conversation.

"Pull back the covers," the doorman ordered.

I did, and Miss D'Arcy appeared in all her splendor. She resembled, I decided in crazy irrelevance, "The Naked Maja" with a real mad on.

Without turning his head, the doorman said, "O.K., Lou."

The other one came through the door. He was short and had a chest like a beer keg. On his chest dangled a Rolleiflex with a fancy lens. He squinted

at the light, peered around the room as if setting the tax rate, and then regarded Miss D'Arcy. "Put your arms around the John, girlie," he said in a detached way.

"Oh," Miss D'Arcy said. "I get it. A shakedown. This is a shakedown bit, ain't it."

"Just do as you're told, girlie."

She put her arms around my neck. "If this is a shakedown," she said lightly, "why not cut me in? You cut me in and I'll give you some poses that'll make your Brownie smoke. O.K.?"

The doorman laughed heavily. "What do you say, Lou? Should we cut the girlie in?"

"A hundred bucks and you got pictures they wouldn't look at in Paris. O.K.?" Miss D'Arcy was warming to all the nifty fun going on.

"What do you say, Lou? Should we cut her in?"

"Sure. Why not?" Lou sounded bored.

Miss D'Arcy began to maneuver, the camera began to click, and I began to get sick.

"That's enough for now," the doorman said finally.

"You bastards are going to cut me in, ain't ya?" Matilda whined.

"Sure, girlie," the doorman murmured, "here's your payoff."

The Colt, looking as big as a sewer pipe, came up to the level and the room was filled with thunder. Miss D'Arcy bent into a U, spun across the bed, flew up against the dirty green wall, and bounced back against the night table, sending the lamp whirling into a pinwheel of flickering light and tinkling glass. Then she rolled onto the bed, sent an absent stare at the ceiling, and slid out of sight, taking the blankets with her.

I was certain I would be sick. Really, I mean.

Carl the doorman blew at the Colt's muzzle, and I saw another pistol—this one a .38 Detective Special—in his other hand. It was only then that I noticed he was wearing gloves.

"Here," he said, holding the .45 out to me, grip forward. "Take this."

"Not me," I said in somebody else's voice.

"Take it. You don't take it and we put you down beside the girlie, good and cold, and your wife gets pix of the bodies."

I took the .45 in my hand. I didn't bother to press the trigger. There wouldn't be any ammunition in it, anyway.

"All right, pal. Now give it back."

I gave it back.

After a quick glance around the room, Carl and his roly-poly Rollei bearer went out the door. A car door slammed, then another, and I went to the window and watched the red Impala pull out from behind the gas station and swish off toward the north.

In three minutes I was in the Hertz Chevy, hitting about eighty for town.

CHAPTER 12

No matter how often you might see it—and I'd seen it enough in my day—you never get used to the sight of somebody pumping a bullet into somebody else. There is a grotesqueness in the scene, a puppet-like quality in the principals and a lugubrious, jerky effect in the continuity, as if watching an old-fashioned movie. But beyond this, there is a weird incredibility; it seems impossible that a flicker of flame, a clap of sound, and the movement of a lump of metal from here to there can really shut down a life. In the first moments it's as if everybody is kidding, and then you look at the body and the light is out of the eyes and you know.

I was all caught up in this feeling, and it was hard to concentrate. But at Nineteenth Street and Coleman Avenue there was a general hospital, and I remembered its public parking lot seemed almost always to be full of cars, day and night. So I drove

there and was lucky enough to find an open space at the far end. I eased the Chevy into this, and it became just another car in what amounted to an eternal, sluggishly altering sea of cars. It could be days before anyone might think to check it—even the scouts Hertz would send out to determine why Matilda D'Arcy was keeping it so long. I left the key in the ignition switch and took a few minutes to wipe down the steering wheel, door handles, and dash area, although I was fairly certain that I'd not been in the car without gloves. The only one who could definitely place me in Miss D'Arcy's rented car and in her room was the bushy-haired dreamboat who had signed me in at the Happy Hour. But even in my lingering shock I could perceive that the motel keeper would have had to be silenced if the coming blackmail was to work. I could not visualize Carl strolling into the motel office and saying, Hey, pal, we don't want the cops on him yet, so how about forgetting who brought that female corpse in Number Eight, eh? I could, though, visualize Carl strolling into the motel office and saying, Bang, bang—you're dead.

Four and a half years in Munich's back alleys tend to make one think that way.

No, I wouldn't have to worry about the motel keeper.

As for Dom, Miss Goodman, Andy Morris, and the public library drunk—they could link me with D'Arcy, all right. But instinct told me they were in no position to do anything about it.

Yet.

These things, though—all of them—were mere details in the mosaic of my real problem. What had begun as a sick kind of lark, a vacation from the bead-saying that had become my life, was now

shaping into a struggle for survival. Somebody considered me so important to his interests he had been willing to kill to set me up. I had expected—solicited—petty blackmail, to be sure. But what I had received was candidacy for a murder rap.

The stakes, I decided, must be astronomical.

But whatever the stakes, the fact remained: The fun and games were over.

I got a good grip on my overnight grip, walked a block to the traffic circle at Nineteenth and Hawthorne, then took a bus to the railroad station. I had planned, of course, to catch the morning train to Philly. But that didn't seem like too good an idea now, so I waited in the shadows—glumly thankful that Maudie had fetched me a round-trip ticket from Treasurer's on Friday—until the 10:33 rattled in. Sunk behind a newspaper whose headlines I couldn't see, I rode to the City of Brotherly Love. By one o'clock I was lying on my back in a twelfth-floor bed at the Carson Hotel, wondering whatever had become of brotherly love.

I stared at the ceiling a lot.

Once I considered calling Peg. But then I looked at my watch and realized it was a silly idea.

So I stared at the ceiling some more.

I was very lonely.

The morning paper carried the routine item. A woman tentatively identified as Mrs. Frank N. Stein of Harrisburg, Pa., had been shot to death outside Hootenville and state police were searching for her husband. Also dead was Chauncey Gaber, the motel manager and gas station operator, who had been gunned down in his office. The Stein couple had registered at the motel early last night,

according to detectives, and the double killing had been discovered by a truck driver who had sought lodgings shortly before 11 P.M. Other guests of the motel, who had fled at the sound of police sirens, were being sought for questioning. The killer was obviously an expert marksman, police added. End of story.

The thought of breakfast was appalling, so I cabbled directly to the printer's.

I was sitting in the superintendent's office, having a midmorning cup of coffee with Pete Ballinger and pretending interest in his recitation of the benefits that would accrue to Hooten if *Plastimes* were to change from letterpress to offset, when the intercom told me I was wanted on Line Three.

"Go ahead," Pete said, rising from his chair, "take it on this phone. I have to check the cover run anyhow."

"O.K., thanks, Pete. I'll let you know about the offset proposition after I have our cost control people run up some comparison figures." I tried to sound as if I meant all this.

After he had closed the door I punched the three-button and got on the line. "Dexter."

"Did you see the *Inquirer* this morning, pal?"

The sense of shock that had accompanied last night's events returned in an instant. I licked my lips.

"Oh, hello, Carl," I said stiffly. "How did you know I was here?"

"I called your office and asked for you, sweetie. But answer my question. Did you see the paper?"

"No."

"Man, you're really a cool cat, aren't you? It was all over the first page of the second section in the Final."

"What was?"

There was a soft laugh at the other end. "According to the newspaper, I'm a real marksman."

"So what do you want—the Blue Max?"

"I want you to be on a train. The one-forty-three for Wilmington."

"*Wilmington?* Why?"

"Come along and find out."

"I can't go to Wilmington. I'm due home for supper. My wife will worry if I'm not."

"You'll make supper, pal. If you're a good boy, that is."

"What if I miss the train? I'm pretty busy here, and—"

"Any guy who's too busy to save his life is too busy to live. That's what I always say. What do you always say?"

"All right," I said. "I'll be there."

"And alone, too, huh?"

"Nobody's more alone than I am."

The 1:43 was one of those lousy locals—a half-dozen tin cars with square wheels that stopped at every fireplug between Darby and Claymont. I joined nearly everybody in Philadelphia and read the *Bulletin* for the first few miles. The edition was an early one, with the story on the motel killings rating three paragraphs below the fold on page one. I read it several times, but it said the same things each time, so I rolled up the paper, stuck it in the pocket of my overcoat, and settled back to wait and watch.

Chester station came and went, then Lamokin Street, Highland Avenue, and Marcus Hook. The train was sparsely populated, thanks to its midday schedule, and the passengers were mostly housewife

types with shopping bags. Unless my genial host, Carl, was in disguise, he hadn't climbed aboard. By the time the train had belly-landed at the dinky platform overlooking the steel plant at Naaman's, I was beginning to wonder if I'd got my instructions right. But when the conductor chirp-chirped the signal for takeoff and the wheels began to grind, Carl stepped out of the trackside shelter and heaved himself onto the car ahead. He came down the aisle, huge and unfriendly, darting glances at the dozing housewives. When he saw me finally, he did not grow any friendlier.

"You sure took your sweet time getting here," he said, plumping onto the seat beside me.

"Sorry," I said. "I never drive my train over the speed limit."

"I like to froze on that goddam platform." He said this bitterly, as if I had invented winter.

"Tell me something, you great big marksman you: How the hell am I supposed to get home from Wilmington in time for supper?"

He gave me a sidelong glance out of his thick eyes and snickered. "Relax, pal. Why don't you just sit back and wait to see how this here story turns out?"

"I'm sitting next to you and I'm supposed to relax?"

"I ain't such a bad guy. Lots of people like me."

"Ammunition salesmen? Undertakers?"

"Ha-ha. You're a bird, you are."

"Come on, Carl: Why the train bit?"

"We want to talk to you."

"Who's we?"

"You'll see."

I subsided, telling myself that the payoff was approaching and it was cause for considerable sat-

isfaction to see that my setup—no matter how sloppy and improvised—had been good enough to suck in the bad guys. I didn't know who they were, and I didn't know what their game was, and I certainly had no idea what they might expect from me; but whoever and whatever, I had at least attracted their attention. And all in four days' time.

Ah, Dexter, you clever dog, you. . . .

We clattered into Claymont and Carl punched my arm and told me to get off.

"I thought we were going to Wilmington," I said when we reached the platform.

"Uh-uh."

We waited, huddling against the wind that came off the river. The few housewives who had dismounted with us heaved their packages into assorted station wagons and dispersed into suburban Delaware. Then we were alone with the wind.

"Carl," I said after some frozen silence, "what would you do if I were to slug you and run?"

He patted the lump under his left arm. "I'd make you the only guy in Delaware with wall-to-wall nostrils."

I shook my head and tried to sound scornful. "You wouldn't shoot me. Your boss needs me too much."

"Well," he said, thinking about this, "he'd be put out, I suppose. But, hell, it sounds like fun. So let's try it anyhow."

"Not on your life. I'm too anxious to meet your boss."

Carl nodded toward the road. "That should be him now."

A dark green Cadillac came purring down the hill to make a creamy turn into the parking lot.

Carl poked my arm again. "You want to meet him. So let's go meet him."

On the way to the car I said, "You got on the train at Naaman's as a signal. That meant you'd seen me in one of the train windows, and your boss was watching and knew to meet us in Claymont."

"Ah, Dexter, you clever dog, you," Carl said.

One of the Cadillac's back doors swung open and Carl motioned me in. I climbed in and sat beside the man there.

I was surprised, of course. But I managed to keep my voice level.

"Well," I said levelly, "you look exactly like Claude Lacey, owner and manager of The Swollen Thumb."

"And you," Lacey said, smiling thinly, "look like a man who is in very serious trouble."

CHAPTER 13

"Claude Lacey, the plumber's friend." I shook my head in mock awe.

"I hope I haven't inconvenienced you by asking you to come down here today, Mr. Dexter," he purred.

"Heck, no. I always ride to Wilmington with murderers on Mondays. But tell me: Why didn't you just ask me to drop in at The Swollen Thumb? Or, if you were in a riding mood, why didn't you pick me up in Philly? Why all the rinky-dink with trains?"

Lacey shrugged a natty shoulder. "I had to be in Wilmington on business today. That, plus the fact I prefer not to be seen with you too much at this stage, suggested this kind of meeting. As I say, I hope you don't mind."

We watched Carl climb into the front seat with the driver, a lean and silent redhead with eyes like

peeled grapes. I had not seen this one before. But one thing for certain: He knew cars. He backed the Caddie around and got it sighing toward Philadelphia Pike with all the fuss it takes to snap a pretzel.

"Take two-oh-two to the West Chester bypass, Fred," Lacey told the redhead. "It's the fastest route."

There was a silent interval which I broke finally with a question: "Aside from hardware and shootings, Lacey, what's your line of work?"

Lacey examined his faultless manicure. He was looking very trim today, what with his crisp covert cloth topcoat, paisley scarf, and porkpie Stetson. And his voice was considerably deeper than I remembered.

"My line of work," he said, "is the gathering of information."

"Oh? Like what kind of information?"

"Industrial information."

"Then," I snapped, "why are you futzing around with somebody like me, Lacey? Industrial information-wise, I'm about as knowledgeable as an apprentice pickle-slicer at Hogan's Hoagie Shop."

Lacey, apparently satisfied with the state of things among the cuticles, put his hand away. He regarded me with eyes of metallic blue. "You mustn't underestimate yourself, Mr. Dexter. I've been studying you and your role in life quite a bit these recent days. As editor of *Plastimes* magazine you enjoy a rather remarkable degree of, shall we say, access to all departments and managements of the Hooten Plastics Corporation. You are very casually supervised, to say the least. So with wide operational latitude, as well as minimal vulnerability to petty office disciplines, you represent unique

potential. In short, you might not be so knowledgeable—in the technical sense—but you are very well placed.”

“For what?”

“As I say, for getting me some information I need.”

“As I say, information on what?”

“On Formula F.”

“What’s that? A cough medicine?”

Lacy smiled in his prim way. “Oh, come now, Mr. Dexter, surely you have heard of Formula F—the new thermoplastic invented by Dr. George Kopeck and now in pilot plant production for the Missile Propellant Center. Everybody’s heard about it.”

“So if everybody has heard about it, why ask me?”

“There’s a difference between hearing about something and knowing about that something,” Lacey said. “I must have solid technical information on Formula F. You will get me the data I need.”

“Why should I do this for you, Lacey?”

He shrugged that annoying shrug again. “Because if you don’t the police will gain possession of a forty-five-caliber pistol whose grip and trigger areas bear your fingerprints and whose ballistics characteristics correspond with those of the bullet recovered from the body of the late Matilda D’Arcy.”

I nodded, then after a pause asked him another question: “What brought me to your attention, Lacey? As a potential spy, that is.”

He watched the Foulk Road intersection go by, his eyes oddly opaque. “As operator of The Swollen Thumb,” he said, “I see lots of things. You

have no idea how much goes on in a store like that. All sorts of people come in and talk about all sorts of things. A trained observer—and I am among the best of these—can determine which customer is happy, which one is sad, which is pleased with life, which is beaten and knows it. The demoralized, the sad, the beaten are always vulnerable, and I sift through the varieties of unhappiness I see, choosing the individuals who might be the most vulnerable and, therefore, the most useful. I have long known that you are unhappy, Mr. Dexter, and I have long reserved you for a delicate service. The time for that service has arrived.”

“I see. But what makes you think I’m unhappy?”

Lacey took out a gold case, flipped it open, and selected a cigarette. He did not offer me one. “There has been a peculiar glaze, a special indirection, in your eyes for some time now,” he said, lighting the smoke with a gold Ronson. “This is always a sure sign of the man who has an unsatisfactory homelife. Coupled with the irritable defensiveness you always bring into the store, it virtually assured me that you were a man who, sooner or later, would burst into rebellion and exchange the stifling boredom and shame of the typical American marriage for the sweet giddiness of fornication.”

“You sure you don’t write scripts for ‘Peyton Place’?”

He stowed away his smoking appliances and blew a long stream of smoke at the back of Fred’s red head. “You’ll have to admit that my forecast was correct: You not only burst into rebellion, you’ve run amok. I had been hoping to base my control of you on mere threats of exposure to your

wife and Balsley Hooten. But with your total lack of discretion, your swinging stands to become the talk of the town. Therefore, I have had to take special measures."

"Like ordering Carl to put the cool on Matilda D'Arcy, eh?"

"Mm. You might no longer fear unemployment and the divorce court, but you'll surely have to fear a murder charge."

Fred let the Caddie glide to a pause at the traffic yield sign at the Talley-Ho Motel, then gave it full throttle. We boomed into the northbound lane of 202 at a pace which, I figured, could put us in Hudson Bay inside four minutes.

"All right," I said. "What do you want me to do? Precisely, I mean."

Lacey turned his head and stared at me down his nose. "I want you to deliver to me all engineering data, process information, process control measures, manufacturing specifications, purchase orders, potential customer lists, and lease and license agreements—if any—on Formula F. I—"

"My God, Lacey, you don't want me. You want an IBM computer. No one man could pull all that material together for you. Be reasonable, will you?"

Lacey said, "All you have to do is make a choice. Either you go to considerable effort and dig out some data or you go to no effort and face a murder rap. It's that simple."

"What if the data I deliver isn't good enough? I mean, I'm no research scientist or engineer. I won't know if I'm stealing useful stuff or not."

"You let me worry about that."

"I'd love to. But I'm afraid I'm going to do a bit of worrying, too."

Lacey smiled frostily. "Good. That will keep you diligent. But if you consistently deliver useless material, you will be turned over to the authorities."

"Which reminds me: What if I run to the cops and tell all?"

"Then Carl will be asked to pay a visit to Mrs. Dexter and the children."

"Oh."

There was a long pause. Then: "How long do you plan to hold the D'Arcy thing over me, Lacey?"

"What do you mean?"

"Saying I got everything you want on Formula F, what happens then? Am I given an honorable discharge from your service? Am I retired with a gold watch?"

He laughed quietly, a soft sucking sound. "Well, that's looking ahead quite much, Mr. Dexter. But if you perform well—and I have every confidence that you will—there would be little reason to dismiss you as an employee, now would there?"

"Say I leave the Hooten Company for some reason?"

"If you were to do something that silly, Mr. Dexter, I'd be compelled to have you executed."

"I am indeed in trouble."

Supper was a grim procedure—a long half hour in which Billy ate thirty or forty helpings of everything, Suzy ate everything but thirty or forty peas, and Peg retreated behind the stiff little smile she always wore when saying one thing and thinking another.

The base of my preoccupation at this juncture was the question of what to do about Claude Lacey. I could—perhaps should—report at once to

Balsley Hooten. But what could I tell him, after all? All right, so Lacey was blackmailer-in-chief of a network of vulnerable people turned informants. But who was in the network? What were the informants informing him about? Why? And for what gain to Lacey? He must be selling information to somebody—or a list of somebodies. Who, then? And who was so anxious to acquire the technology on Formula F? Why would Lacey be willing to murder in the effort to deliver it?

Somewhere in the domestic bliss I decided what I must do to find some answers.

I viewed my new decision from all angles—all the while struggling to evince enthusiasm over Peg's acquisition of the Cobweb's pine dry sink for a paltry ninety-four dollars and listening to Suzy's tortuous recitation of her poem, "What the Sunflower Said to the Sun."

We were stacking the dishwasher, Peg and I, when she said, "Dex?"

"Yeah?" I answered tentatively.

"Let's go out tomorrow night. Just you and I."

I glanced at her, bemused at this odd turn. "Out?"

"Mm."

"What do you mean—out?"

"Let's go to a movie, and then have a drink at some quiet little place."

"I can't, Peg."

"Oh? Why?"

"I'm going to New York tomorrow night."

She looked up from her puttering, her eyes dark and thoughtful. "I see," she said. "Well, it was just an idea."

"It was a good one, too. I only wish I could take you up on it." I meant this, but the words were

inadequate, and I hated them. I couldn't remember when she had suggested something so frivolously unrelated to house and children and bills and duty, and it shook me in some strange way, now that she had.

"Why are you doing that?" she said.

"What?"

"Putting the sugar in the refrigerator."

"Oh. Excuse me."

"Where are you going in New York?"

"Ah, I want to talk to an offset printer. I'm trying to work up the economics on offset. We might save some money, switching *Plastimes* to offset."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"I mean, why did you ask where I was going in New York?"

"I just wondered where you were going in New York. Why?"

"Well, you haven't been interested in my work—my comings and goings—for a long time. It's a little unusual for you to ask."

"You've been a little unusual yourself lately," she said, not looking at me.

"Who? Me? How so?"

She hunched a shoulder and arched a brow. "I don't know—it's hard to say, really. I don't know what I mean."

This was her go-ahead-and-ask-me-some-more gambit. It meant that she knew precisely what she meant, and she was waiting for me to press a cross-examination that would bring out something bad or negative she thought about me so that when, angered by the revelation, I'd have only myself to

blame. ("After all," she liked to say, "he who asks questions should not get sore at the answers.")

"Yes, you do, Peg," I sighed. "Let's have it."

She peered at me over the pan she was drying. "The girls are talking a lot about you lately. More and more all the time."

"The girls? What girls?"

"Oh, you know—the girls at the club, at bridge, down at the shops. Like that. They are saying what an exciting, interesting man you are."

"Oh, come on, now. You've got to be joking."

"No. That's what they say."

"And that bothers you?"

She put down the pan and folded the towel, quietly remote. "I don't know," she said. "I mean I don't know you very well anymore."

"So what's to know? I'm forty-five years old, five-eleven in my jockey shorts, have silver threads among the gold. I make an adequate salary, pay my bills pretty much on time, carry all the proper insurance. I vote independent, join as few organizations as possible, and have a solidly respectable dislike of people who join as many as possible. I have a nice house and a nice wife and nice kids who someday will buy me a nice two-thousand-dollar funeral. And, oh, yes: I use Crest and Right Guard, like a cigarette should."

Her voice became softer. "You're getting more and more like you were in the old days."

I gave her a close look, a melancholy brushing at me. "Oh?"

"You're getting tense and distant and hard and secretive. And there's a kind of cruelty sneaking into your eyes."

"Oh, come on. I'm still me. Good old lovable slob."

She shook her head. "No. You're getting like Munich all over again."

I held up a hand. "Now wait just a darn old minute. I've changed my whole life around to spare you that jazz. I've done everything a man can do—followed every rule ever laid down by every ladies' magazine. I gave up the Army, I gave up newspapering, I gave up a hell of a portion of self-respect to put you in this cozy little house in this cozy little town with all its cozy little mediocrities. You wanted roots, security, tree-shaded streets in Small Town America. Well, you got them. You've got everything you ever asked of me."

"That isn't what I was talking about," she said in that quiet tone. "I was talking about you and Munich."

"Forget Munich. It's the Bad Old Dream Department."

"I can't forget it."

"Why?"

"Because of the look in your eyes. And the way you toss in your bed now and say strange things in your sleep."

"Then sleep in the guest room."

"See? There. That's what I mean. That's something you would have said in Munich. You're changing back to the man I didn't like."

The rising vapors of the anger that had been forming somewhere around my ankles ignited, sending fire up my frame. I blurted, "*I'm* changing? Hoo-boy. Look who's talking: my charming, busy wife, who tears around town babbling merrily to Balsley Hotten's chain of informants about the private stuff in our lives. There was a time, my dear lady, when your own mother couldn't have dragged

such stuff from you with a chromium-plated locomotive. But now you equate it with the current sale at Hootenville Dry Goods or who'll cook the casserole for the Ladies' Guild crochet binge. If you know what's good for you, you'll just keep your trap shut about *my* inadequacies, sweetheart."

I stomped out of the kitchen and went down to the cellar to think.

CHAPTER 14

Show me a husband and father who runs to the cellar for peace and quiet and I'll show you a poor sap of a dreamer.

In my cellar, the air was jittering with the clatter of the electric train and the throat-clearing staccato boys make when they imitate machine guns. I stood diffidently at the bottom of the stairs, watching the wild waving of arms and the red-faced yammering that accompanied the dogfight between a scale model Fokker manned by Billy and a Nieuport under the command of Gary Morris. Things didn't go so well for the German plane; at the top of a loop it sputtered, snorted, shuddered, and then fell into a long, whining spin that took it smack into the locomotive, which was hauling a string of freight cars across the high trestle outside of town. Train and Fokker plunged into the canyon with an HO-gauge rumble, and

Gary's Neiuport hummed off triumphantly into the sunset over the oil burner.

"There's a great future for you guys at Twentieth Century-Fox," I said.

"Oh, hi, Dad. Some crash, huh?"

"I'll say. Think that train'll ever work again?"

"Heck, yeah. We're always cracking it up."

"Let's show him the one where the train jumps the track in the station and wipes out all the troops," Gary said, still flushed with his victory.

"Naw," Billy vetoed. "It takes too long to set up. We'll do the head-on crash in the tunnel."

I held up a hand. "Don't put yourself out for me. I'm not much for train wrecks on Monday nights."

"No trouble, Dad. All we have to do is get the two trains going at just the right time. Man, does it make a doozy."

"I'll bet. But give me a rain check, will you? I don't think my nerves would stand it right now."

Billy sat on the high stool beside the train table and gave me a serious look. "Something wrong?"

"No. Why?"

"You look sort of white, like. Like you just blew your cool."

"Oh, I'm O.K. Just a little tired."

"Fathers are always tired," Gary said grumpily. He was not too happy about my holding up the HO mayhem, I could see.

"Well, Gary," I said, "a man gets a bit weary earning the cash to finance train wrecks. You'll understand that when you grow up and have your own little train wreckers."

"I don't have a train set and my father's always tired anyhow."

He was beginning to irritate me. "Sure he is. He

gets you a lot of other things, though, doesn't he? And he has to work hard for them, doesn't he?"

Gary shrugged, unimpressed by this appeal to logic. "So what's so hard about being a lawyer who never saves people from bum raps?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Lawyers are supposed to argue with the cops and prove in a courtroom that some guy really didn't shoot some other guy. My father doesn't even argue with traffic cops. He just messes around with papers."

"You watch too much television, Gary. Your pappy's a good lawyer. It's his job to protect the interests of a lot of good guys who are making useful things put to useful uses by a lot of useful companies. It's hard, important work, and he's very good at it."

Gary no longer irritated me; he intrigued me. And something told me to keep him talking.

"I still say a lawyer ought to be a lawyer," Gary said with truculent stubbornness. "Fathers always got reasons why they can't do something or be something."

"It's not that simple, Gary—"

"Heck," he said darkly, "look at you yourself."

"Me? What about me?"

He busied himself at the train table, returning cars from canyon to track. "You aren't being what you ought to be," he muttered.

I sat on the steps, watching him narrowly. "Oh? What am I not being that I should be being?"

Gary hunched a shoulder again. "Billy's told me all about how you were a counterspy and a big deal in the Army and all. A major, yet. And you could still be chasing bad guys and saving the

American secrets from the dirty rats and all sorts of exciting things like that. But you aren't."

"Well, no, I'm not. Times have changed. I'm a lot older now, and I have a family, and some bicycles and scale model Fokkers to provide."

Gary humphed, and I could see his old man in him clearly. "Naw," he said, eyes averted, "you gave it up because Mrs. Dexter made you. I know. Billy told me about that, too."

I shot a glance at Billy, but he was preoccupied with the redeployment of some soldiers in the village.

"Oh?" I said. "You mean I'm not a counterspy anymore because Billy's mother won't let me?"

"That's the way I hear it. Billy says you used to argue about it a lot. When he was little, mostly." His blue eyes gazed at me with the direct, unforgiving calm of unknowing youth. This stolid quality made him seem older than his eleven years.

"How about that, Billy? Is that what you've been telling Gary?"

My son made a minimizing sound and returned my stare with no trace of guile or evasion. "Sure. It's true, ain't it?"

"Isn't."

"Isn't it?"

"Well, it isn't the kind of thing people ordinarily discuss outside the family. Gary isn't interested in what your mother and I talk about."

"Heck, Gary tells me all kinds of stuff about what his mother and father argue about. It doesn't mean anything. We're pals."

I couldn't resist it. I said, "Oh, come on, now. Gary's mother and father never argue about anything. Do they, Gary?"

"Sure. Lotsa times," Gary said, expansive with family pride.

"Really? I find that hard to believe."

"Sure they do, Mr. Dexter. Heck, they had a good one just the other night about you."

"Me? They argued about me?"

"They sure did. Pop said he was worried about you and Mom said he didn't have to worry about you, you being so smart and full of cool and all."

I raised my brows in an exaggerated way to prove that I was only mildly interested in all this. "So your father's worried about me, eh? Why would that be?"

"Oh, I don't know, exactly. He was cleaning his pistol and she was working on one of her antiques and I was building one of Revell's big-scale Spads and they got to talking about this and that and I wasn't listening too good because the Spad's a tough one—it has all those struts with the little holes you got to run thread through so it looks like guy wires and there are lotsa itty-bitty parts you have to fuss a lot with but, boy, it's sure worth it because it makes a real boss model when you're all done—and Mom said something about how they ought to have you and Mrs. Dexter over for bridge soon and he said he didn't want to because he has too much work or something and Mom got on him for being away from the house nights so much lately and he said he had to be away from the house lots because he had a special case he was working on or something and Mom started getting madder and said she thought that's why Pop gave up criminal law for the kind of work he does with Hooten so they wouldn't have any more of his being away from home the way he was at the beginning and I tried to put my two cents in about

remember, that's what Billy Dexter's parents are always yakking about, and they got on you, like I said."

I wondered how Gary could manage all that with no discernible intake of breath. But despite this little vagary of the mental process, I was able to enjoy a building sense of relief and excitement, and I pressed on.

"Oh, then you told your parents about Mrs. Dexter not wanting me to stay in the Army?"

"Heck, yeah. Long time ago. And how she got sore at you for hopping around on those newspaper jobs, too."

"You mean you didn't first mention it to them the other night?"

"No. Like I said, a long time ago."

"What night was that, Gary? That you were working on your Spad, I mean."

"Friday. I remember. 'Friday Night at the Movies' wasn't on. They had some silly special instead. It burns me up when they do that."

I nodded sympathetically. "Your pop was cleaning his pistol?"

"Yeah. The Luger."

"I didn't know he has a gun collection."

"Naw, no collection. Just a souvenir Luger from World War Two."

"Does he clean it often?"

The blue eyes were shadowed by faint disgust. "Him? He hardly ever takes it out of his desk drawer, even to let me look at it."

"Then why was he cleaning it Friday night?"

"Beats me. He does a lot of weird things."

"Has he ever fired it?"

"I don't know. He might be thinking about it,

though. He bought some bullets for it last week. I know. I saw them in his dresser drawer."

I pretended considerable interest in rubbing a smudge from the toe of one of my loafers. "How about that?" I said.

"Hey, Billy," Gary said with an abrupt turn of mind, "why doesn't Revell make a big scale Fokker D-7 to match the Spad?"

Billy's stream of consciousness was involved in less academic questions. "Let's go up and build a sandwich," he said.

With no further acknowledgement of my presence, they pounded up the stairs on all sides of me, all elbows and knees and appetite.

I followed them up.

Cellars are a great institution, I told myself. No telling what you might learn when you descend into one.

"Peg?"

"What is it?"

"I apologize. I know you don't talk about us."

"I never have, I never will."

"I don't know why I implied you might have."

"You didn't imply I might have. You said it right out."

"I guess I did. I'm sorry."

"What did you think I said about us?"

"Old Hooten-Nanny said something the other day. It must have been a coincidence or something, but it sounded as if he knew about how you've laid down the law against our ever moving again."

"You make me sound awful. Laying down laws, and all."

"Well, you have, haven't you?"

"You know very well what I've done. I've simply made it clear that we owe it to our children to give them roots."

"Roots can strangle things, too, you know."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"Things need roots to grow, sure enough. But some things' roots strangle other things."

"But what did you mean about our roots strangling what things?"

"I just meant that giving our kids roots might keep all of us from branching out. Oh, for God's sake: How did we get so *botanical*?"

"What kind of branching out do you have in mind?"

"Nothing. It was just a figure of speech."

"You meant something. What?"

"Forget it, will you?"

"No."

"I was just talking."

"About what?"

"Nothing."

"Has Mr. Hooten offered you a transfer? To one of the plant towns, or something?"

"Hell, no."

"I'd refuse, you know."

"Hooten hasn't said a word about a transfer. So forget it, will you?"

"Have you had a job offer from somebody else? Is that it?"

"Look: Will you please get off this kick? I don't want to discuss it anymore."

"So you have, then. Who made the offer?"

"Peg, for the last time: Stop it."

"Who? And for what kind of job where?"

"Oh, dear Jesus."

“Dex. Dex—where are you going?”

“To the cellar.”

“Why?”

“To wreck a train or two.”

CHAPTER 15

The night wind moved fretfully out of the hills under a rolling overcast. The town huddled into itself, silent and melancholy, and even the car seemed to be numbed by the raw chill.

"Tomorrow, maybe next day, we're going to have a lulu," Bruce said cheerily. "Blizzard, maybe."

I made the turn onto North Adams—a hardening artery of darkened houses and parked cars—and made a sound of agreement. I was in no mood for chitchat, preoccupied as I was with the various little joys of survival among jackals. Primary among them was the fact that I had withdrawn a thousand dollars in savings for the right to ride this Tuesday night with Hootenville's answer to Godzilla. Secondary among them was the fact that I had spent nearly sixty other dollars on diversionary train rides and car rentals designed to make

everybody—namely Peg and the Chrysler, et al—think I had indeed gone to New York.

Bruce shifted his weight on the seat and said, “Damn cars. They get less leg- and headroom every year.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t drive my Renault tonight.”

“Ha. Them little bastards I could use for roller skates. You hear the one about the elephant what raped a VW? He was goofy about anything with a trunk in the front. Ha-ha-ha.”

I tried to think of something that would spare me a string of bad jokes. I ventured: “You sure that your lady friend has alerted the sitters?”

“Sure,” Bruce grunted. “Cleo’s reliable. You tell her to call somebody, she calls somebody. She may be only a barroom waitress but she’s a smart ginch. Looker, too.”

I tried to see Hefflefinger’s barmaid as a looker, but it was like trying to see Primo Carnera as a ballerina.

“Got guts, too. I seen her one night a two-bit hood high on snow comes in Hefflefinger’s and draws a heater and tells everybody put their bread on the bar. He was standing where none of we guys could reach him without being drilled. But Cleo is close enough and she reaches out and picks up the snowbird and throws him prat-first to me. I dribble him down the floor a few times, then sink him in the basket. Score one for old Hefflefinger U. Ha-ha.”

“Basket? Like in basketball?”

“Yeah. The big trash barrel back of the bar. He went in it nice and neat and quiet. Then Carl picks him up and starts shooting foul shots with him. It was a real yuk all around.”

“Carl?”

“Yeah. The big clown what shags cars out at The Birches.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a small stir of worry. “You are a pal of Carl’s?”

“Nah. I don’t know him worth a damn. He’s a creepy gunsel what does odd jobs now and then for old man Stokes. I don’t like the sonabitch, between you and I. He’s a free-lancer, and you can’t trust free-lancers. Not all the way. They’ll do your job, maybe, but their heart ain’t ever in it. Somebody offer them a higher dollar, they move right over to that side. They ain’t got no pride in their work.”

“Mm-hm,” I agreed. “That’s the trouble with things nowadays. Too few people take pride in their work.” I paused, then added, “But how about you, Bruce? Can I count on you? You don’t know me at all, and here you are, about to do a very delicate job for me.”

“I got to, even if I didn’t want to, working for Stokes. He’s a very strict boss. Only first-class guys on his regular payroll. And to get first-class guys he pays good, puts up all sorts of fringe benefits. You know I get time-and-a-half for overtime, plus four weeks of vacation a year? Hospitalization? Noncontrib life insurance? A pension?”

“No kidding.”

“Yeah. Guys like Carl: They never get on the Stokes payroll regular, like me. Stokes uses them, but only on piecework.”

“He rents them?”

“Yeah. Like Hertz Rent-a-Hood.”

He chuckled, shaking the car only a little bit, and we fell silent for a time in which I drove us off North Adams and across the park to the head of Central Avenue. Snowflakes, scattered and moth-

like in the glare of the headlights, made isolated splashes on the windshield. When we reached Harrison Park Circle, I pulled the station wagon into Coleman Place and parked in the shadows beneath the trees.

"This it?" Bruce wanted to know.

"Not yet. We've got about a block to walk."

We locked the Plymouth and I led the way across Coleman Place and through the service alley between an apartment house and the small knot of shops that faced on the circle. The night was very quiet, except for the wind and an occasional car that would whine down Central. We skirted the dimly lit expanse of the parking lot, following the hedge line that separated it from the sleeping houses beyond. Easing through a gate, we stood in the shadow of the residential wing of The Swollen Thumb. There were no lights in the building, and I stood for a time, trying to visualize its interior arrangement. The first floor appeared to serve as a general storage and utility area. On the second floor, to the rear and overlooking the adjacent backyards, was a large, Colonial-style picture window. That would be the living room. Here on this side were three standard six-over-six windows, then a fourth one, smaller and narrow. This would be the bathroom. Selecting what must be the bedroom, I put my head close to Bruce's and whispered, "See that window there? You see a light in that window, come on up. If you see nothing, or see lights go on somewhere else in the building, I'm in trouble—so come in and get me. But go slow, so you don't get into trouble trying to get me out of trouble. O.K.?"

"You don't want me to go in with you?"

"No. I want you to cover the outside until I

signal you with a light in that room. But if ten minutes go by and you don't see any light, come in with your gun out."

"You're the doctor. But hurry up. I'm freezing already."

Leaving Bruce in the shadows, I moved to the side door which, I found, was barred by a spring lock. It was tougher opening a new bottle of catsup than it was getting through this. Inside, I stood motionless at the foot of a stairway, listening for sounds of restless natives. But the place was as still as a church on Labor Day, its hush made somehow more oppressive by the smell of plaster and fresh paint. I climbed the stairs softly. At the top there was a small foyer vaguely illuminated by the glow of a streetlight across the parking lot outside. I paused here, examining the environment and catching a muted breath. Then I moved along the central hallway and was pleased to find that the two doors on each side were open, making it possible to peek into the rooms without leaving the protection of the corridor, my one route out. A small bedroom, tidy and unoccupied, and the bathroom on one side a galley-like kitchen and another bedroom on the other. In this second bedroom were the sounds of deep breathing and an occasional snuffle.

He was sleeping on his back—another break.

I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out Billy's Colt .45, the plastic and metal job that looked more like a Colt .45 than a Colt .45 did. I pressed the muzzle gently against the tip of his nose and held it there. He stirred, licked his lips, then opened his eyes.

I murmured, "Awake, sweet prince, lest, in this

fitful time, I blast thy schnozz into yon parking lot."

"Wha—"

I interrupted his broadcast with a slab of adhesive tape laid—with considerable zest, I'm afraid—across his mouth. Then I took a handful of his pajamas and jerked him into a sitting position, holding the toy pistol to the side of his head. "Man in your line of business ought really to post guards, you know."

"Aarmfgh," he said.

"Now listen carefully: I'm going to that chair in the corner and throw you those pants and that shirt and that sweater and those shoes. You will put them on. Then you will place your wallet and car keys on the bed. Then you will lie flat on the floor."

His eyes, glistening in the half-light from outside, were hot and full of murder. He made another little speech, but it, too, sounded like a tuba packed with wet socks.

"Frankly, Lacey, I'd dearly love to shoot you dead in your beddy-by-bunk. But as long as you do as I say, you have a chance to live. A very slim one, but a chance."

"Mm-phrmph-armph-rmm."

"Atta boy. I knew you'd understand." I turned on the lamp by the window.

Bruce tied Lacey's wrists and ankles with the clothesline I'd brought, then wrapped a blanket around him and tossed him over a shoulder like a soldier toting a bedroll. I checked the apartment again. But again I found no gun. So I turned off the light and followed Bruce downstairs and into the night, locking the door after us.

When we arrived at the station wagon, I dropped the tailgate and stepped aside while Bruce placed Lacey aboard. Then, leaning into the car, I said, "I'm going to remove the tape, Lacey. If you want to find out what it's like to be dead, just let out a yell." I yanked away the gag.

"What are you trying to pull off, Dexter?" Lacey exploded. "Have you lost your mind or something?"

"I'm kidnapping you, that's what I'm doing. And, as an extra added attraction, I might kill you."

"You're mad."

"Yep. Mad as a hornet with hives, as my Aunt Hazel used to say."

"What do you want, anyhow?"

"Right now I want to know where your Caddie is parked."

"Go to hell, Dexter."

"Bruce," I sighed, "will you be kind enough to pick up that jack handle there and hit Mr. Lacey across the nose?"

"Sure."

"Not too hard. Just enough to smash the cartilage and make him ugly."

"Wait, Dexter," Lacey said. "The car's parked at the Sunoco station at Eighth and Clements. It's supposed to be serviced tomorrow morning. Oil change."

I looked at Bruce, a silo-size shadow in the shadows, and told him, "O.K., put the gag on Lacey, lock him in back, and take me to Eighth and Clements. I'll follow you from there in the Cadillac."

"Check," Bruce said. "By the way: Do you expect any more interference tonight? If you do, I'd

like to pick up a sap. Cleo's teaching me to play the piano and I want to perfect my hands."

I turned and gave him a close look. "Interference? What are you talking about?"

"I already decked two guys. I got to deck any more, I want a sap."

"You decked two *guys*?"

"Yeah. I was waiting in the bushes outside this character's house and two guys come walking up, fast and quiet, like. When they were busy fixing to jimmy the door, I decked them and laid them out in the shrubbery."

"Who were they, for God's sake?"

"How the hell do I know? You said to cover you. I covered you. I didn't ask to see their driver's licenses."

"Oh, brother. Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"What's to tell? I was doing my job, that's all."

"Wait here a minute."

Muttering to myself, I hurried back to The Thumb and rooted under every bush in sight.

There wasn't a body to be found. Whoever Bruce had put to sleep had arisen and set out for other parts.

Ah, me . . .

The farmhouse Stokes had selected was a genuine Charles Addams Gothic. Two goons in T-shirts and shoulder holsters had met us at the door and watched impassively as Bruce stored Lacey in a first-floor bedroom. Then they had me stand in full light while they looked me over—the idea being, presumably, to memorize my gorgeous features for future recognition purposes.

"Satisfied?" I asked them finally.

Nodding, one of them—a cute little rascal about six-feet-four with UP YOURS tattooed on his left arm—said, “How long you want us to baby-sit? You know yet?”

“No. But I’ll be in touch with you. Meanwhile, you can do something for me. The baby is hiding a gun I need. I want you to get him to say exactly where it is.”

“Well, O.K. But don’t be too long, sweetie,” UP YOURS rumbled. “I got a week in Miami comin’ up. I ain’t missin’ my vacation for nothin’.”

I tossed the Plymouth keys to Bruce. “Let’s go. Plenty of work to do yet tonight.”

“What do you want me to do with these?”

“I’ll be ahead of you in the Caddie. When we get to Pine Needle Lake, watch for me to stop. When I do, you pull up behind me. Think you can remember all that?”

Bruce gave me a dirty look. “Is that some kind of crack?”

“Just a little joke, Bruce. No offense.” I glanced at the pair of gunsels. “Keep the faith, hear? Remember: Lean on the baby. I want to know where he’s hiding that gun.”

I drove the Cadillac off the road and into a clearing at the top of Pine Needle Hill, turned off the motor and lights, and climbed out to stand in the cold night and wait for Bruce to swing the Plymouth to a halt. The trees hissed in the freshening wind and, far below, the unfrozen expanses of the lake tossed and sent up the smell of dark water and decay. The sky was ugly above the swaying black of the forest, and leaves skittered along the gravel road, and somewhere an owl cried. I shivered, pulling my coat tight, and watched as Bruce

darkened the Plymouth and came up the hill, stumbling and cursing softly.

"Hell," he said, "I ain't been out here since I put the blocks to a high-school cheerleader. This place ain't for people. It's for kids."

"So it keeps them off the streets, doesn't it?"

"So O.K. So what's the deal?"

I stamped my feet against the cold and spoke in a low voice. "You wait for me in the Plymouth. Keep the motor running. I'll be back in, oh, give me ten minutes."

"Where you goin'?"

"Down the hill a piece. Whatever happens, sit right here for at least ten minutes. O.K.?"

We parted—Bruce off to his grumpy vigil, I off to the Cadillac and my chores. I laid Lacey's billfold beside me on the seat and put his Stetson—the one which I had snaffled from his closet during the Great Kidnapping and which happily had his name stamped on the sweatband—on my lap. Starting the motor, I released the brake and let the big car drift back onto the road. Once under way and cruising, I turned on the lights, rolled down the windows, and activated the tape-player at full volume, thus filling the night with vintage Dorsey. Steering with one hand, I flipped the lid of Lacey's whiskey flask and sprinkled Scotch all over the passenger seats, front and back. Then I threw the flask on the floor and prepared for the finale.

The road—a twisting nothing that went from nowhere to nowhere—had been carved along the hilly shoreline during the 1930's when the government sought to alleviate the Depression by putting uninterested people to uninteresting work on uninteresting projects. The idea here had been to turn the Pine Needle Lake area into a park, but aside

from this gravel cowpath, weed-grown and pitted, the only product to come of the dream had been countless scores of bastards, furtively sired in the back seats of darkened jalopies.

It was a lousy place, just dandy for my purpose.

At the angle of Shoehorn Curve, I braked the Caddie to a halt. I took a deep breath, then said in a loud voice, "Come on, baby, settle down. Your husband won't be home until tomorrow."

I laughed, also very loud.

I unlatched the door and put the gear selector in neutral. With a luxurious burbling, the car coasted around the remainder of the curve and began to work up real enthusiasm for the long, straight, twenty-degree grade that led down to the right-angle turn at Lakeview Point. As the roll accelerated, I bailed out. I kept my feet and used the momentum to carry me through the scrub growth to Blueberry Overlook, a promontory which spent its portion of eternity looming over Devil's Whirlpool—a nasty swirl of lake so deep and so mean it refused to warm up in summer or freeze in winter. A flip of my hand sent Lacey's Stetson drifting down into this black hostility, then I turned, my back against a tree, to watch and listen.

Reflected light flickering.

A drubbing of big tires.

A clanking, a spattering of stones.

The dwindling wail: *Marie—the dawn is bre-a-a-king—*

A crash. A squealing of metal.

A pause.

—my heart is a-a-a-aching—

A splash, so tremendous and explosive it was almost obscene.

An echo, rumbling through the hills and shaking the night.

A silence—deep and stunned.

“Now,” I murmured in the darkness, “all you little do-gooders up ’n’ at ’em. Come on, everybody: It’s time for gee whiz and holy Toledo and let’s see if anybody got out.”

But I might as well have saved my breath.

Everybody got up ’n’ at ’em, all right.

The forest gloom boomed with the stutter of starting motors. Headlights erupted into crazy flowers of glare. Wheels spun. Then, like a scene from an old Cagney movie in which the police cars careen out of headquarters, a squadron of Fords and Plymouths and Dodges and Mustangs and Camaros and Cougars zoomed out of all corners of the woods to pell and mell up the hill toward town.

In less than forty-two seconds Bruce and I must have been the only human beings within a hundred square miles.

“My aching GI *back*,” Bruce rasped through the car window as I approached, kicking stones. “What in ever-lovin’ hell was all that—the Eighteenth goddam *Panzer* Korps?”

“I forgot that Americans don’t want to get involved,” I snapped.

“I never *seen* so many friggin’ cars.”

“Move over. I’ll drive us back to town.”

“Where’s the Caddie?”

“In the lake.”

“What? You put that beautiful hunk of liens into the goddam *lake*?”

“Oh, shut up. And look for a phone booth. I have to report an accident. God knows nobody else will.”

CHAPTER 16

The next morning I took my time getting to my office—ambling along the corridors and through the product display room to the cafeteria, where the coffee factory was on full stream. I bore my steaming cup to a corner table by the big window and sat in solitary splendor, sipping and thinking droll thoughts.

All I could do now was wait.

That's always the hard part—the waiting.

You sneak, connive, build, buttress, shift, add, subtract, divide, fix, shape, and polish.

Then you wait.

So I was sitting there, waiting, when Dom came in. He was all bundled up in his ski parka, his handsome face long and serious. He went straight to the coffee urns with the fixed, unseeing stare of the dipso heading for a bar. I gave him a hoot and waved him over.

"My God," he said, folding himself into the chair across the table from me, "have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"On the radio it was."

"What was?"

"Claude Lacey was killed last night."

"Claude who?"

"Lacey. The owner of The Swollen Thumb."

"No kidding. Killed? How?"

"At Pine Needle Lake. He rode his Caddie right into the drink."

"Bad show. How did it happen?"

"The cops aren't sure," Dom said through a probing sip. "But they got an anonymous tip around midnight that there'd been an accident out at the turn at Lakeview Point. They found a hole in the railing and Lacey's car under ten feet of water."

"Was he in it?"

"No. At least they haven't found the body yet. But they found his wallet and whiskey flask in the car and his hat floating in the lake."

"Then how do they know he was killed? I mean, maybe some kid stole the heap and was joyriding. Only kids go to Pine Needle Lake."

Dom snickered. "The hell they do. Some of my finest triumphs have occurred out there. Some dames can only get their kicks in the back seat of a car. Besides: Would he be drinking out of Lacey's hip flask? Using Lacey's keys?"

"Sounds pretty circumstantial to me."

"And another besides: Lacey's nowhere. Not at his place. Not at his store. Not anywhere. So the cops have listed him as missing and presumed lost at sea."

"Well," I said, taking a sip of my own, "lots of people have faked accidents for lots of reasons. He'll probably turn up in Denver or Sioux City some day, pretending amnesia to get out from under a lot of debts or something."

"Debts? Lacey? Don't make me laugh. He's one of the richest bastards in town. The Swollen Thumb is veddy, veddy solvent, old chap."

"It still sounds fishy to me."

We fell silent, and I wondered about Dom.

As a regular supplier, he was allowed generally broad access to the main offices of Hooten Plastics and fairly easy access to Hooten's Hootenville plant and labs—provided, of course, he signed the visitors' register as required of all nonemployee types. But once signed in he could wander free, except in the few areas of the plant that housed confidential equipment or test operations conducted by R and D. I wondered where he would be wandering today.

And I wondered why I wondered.

There was something going on with Dom today. My gonads told me so.

"What brings you up here so early, Dom?"

He made a face. "Same old crap. An ad layout for Tommy Barron that will be due at the agency in New York last Tuesday; Ziggy Schroeder's employee recruitment brochure; a talk with the guys in Display."

"Oh," I said, not sure why I didn't believe him. "Come on, drink up. I'll walk you by Barron's office."

Dom peeped at his watch, looked over his shoulder, and became very busy hiding the oddly anxious expression that returned to his face. "No—you

go ahead. I'll need another cup of whatever this is."

I stood up to go.

"By the way," Dom said. "I still haven't found that muscle you're looking for."

"Well, keep trying, hear?"

"Yeah. But it doesn't look too promising."

I sauntered out of the cafeteria, feeling his big brown eyes on my back. Once in the hall and clear of the doorway, I quick-stepped to one side and took up a post in the alcove formed by a shoulder of the freight elevator shaft. In about four seconds, I'd say, Dom came hurrying into the hall to make for the utility stairway to the second floor. This was curious, since Tommy Barron's office (as well as Ziggy Schroeder's and Display's) was on the first floor.

Keeping out of sight and treading softly (as they had taught me at good old Counterespionage Tech), I followed him up the stairs.

Oh-ho.

Dom was planning to visit Andy Morris. I could tell, because he went to the door marked Andrew Morris and went in without so much as a nod at Andy's secretary—somewhat of a dish, by the way.

Andy was waiting at the inner door, and from my position in the corridor I could hear him say, "Well, you're on time for a change."

"Right on time," I heard Dom say. "Not a minute early, not a minute late. I saw Dexter downstairs, incidentally."

"Oh? Had he heard the news?"

"No. But he didn't bat an eye when I told him. Cool one."

"I wish I could say the same for his wife. She just called me—all in a tizzy. I think we'll have to

take her down to see Brewster. Otherwise, she could turn into a bigger problem than her husband."

The door slammed.

I went back downstairs, perplexed and anxious over this bizarre turn.

My office was filled to the brim with three people.

The central figure was LSD, all tweeds and wattles and cologne, who sat at my desk and beamed his 1930 press agent's leer toward another figure—Alexander T. Fitch, Hootenville's most altruistic grifter and columnist. Fitch, in turn, was in earnest conversation with Dr. George Kopeck, who had abandoned his lab coat for something gray and vaguely suit-shaped.

"Well," I said, not bothering to conceal my disgust at myself for having forgotten Fitch's plan to visit this morning, "what brings you mountains down Mohammed-way?"

LSD's oyster-like eyes came around at me, his feigned amiability badly strained. "Ah," he said in his whiskey baritone, "talk about banker's hours. Glad to see you made it before lunch."

"I would have been here sooner but there was an Apache raid on the fort. I barely got the women and children to safety." I was babbling, of course, but I couldn't think of anything else to do at the moment.

"Why must you always be so flip, Dexter?" LSD grumped.

"I don't know. And that's the absolute truth." I found enough space in the room to turn my eyes toward Fitch. "Hi, Fitch. What's up?"

The narrow newsman said, "Right now I'm look-

ing for a story. Mr. Drew and Dr. Kopeck seem to think you might break a rule and be helpful just this once."

"What kind of helpful?"

"Mr. Fitch wants to do an article on the use of Hooten products in the national defense," Dr. Kopeck broke in, his nasal pedantry in top form.

"I see. And he has asked you for suggestions, then?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Actually he contacted Mr. Drew, who in turn contacted me."

LSD shook his wattles importantly. "I remind you, Dexter, it is the mission of the Community-Relations Department to cooperate fully with members of the press, radio, TV, and other communications media in the pursuit of their extraordinary responsibility to the men, women, and, yes, children, of this great nation of ours. I sleep better nights, knowing that dedicated, fearless men of Mr. Fitch's stripe are serving as watchdogs over the affairs of our town, our county, our state, our glorious country."

If only he had chuckled. Or winked, even. But the horror of it was, he was absolutely serious.

"You bet," I said, deadpan. My eyes averted, I asked Fitch, "How do you want to get at this story you have in mind?"

"I—"

"He wants you to take him on a tour of the Missile Propellant Center," Kopeck interrupted, obviously eager to show that he, too, stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Fitch on the chattering-typewriter skirmish line. "And I think it's a sterling idea."

"Then why are you here, Fitch?" I asked. "Why

not go directly to the center and have the PIO take you through? It's his show, nor ours."

Fitch nodded, buffing his nails against the lapel of his Botany 500. "I know. But I want to do a Hooten tie-in. You're a big outfit in town—employ a thousand-some peasants—and I want to link what the peasants do to what the Army does."

"Of course, of course," LSD put in unctuously. "We will be delighted." He glanced at me. "You will cooperate fully with Mr. Fitch, Dexter. Give him anything he wants."

"Well, sure. But what do he wants?"

Fitch said, "I've made a date with the PIO at the Missile Center for a tour of the place this afternoon. I'd like you to go along and fill me in on any Hooten angles that come up."

I shook my head. "Sorry, dad. I need more notice. I can't simply pop off to Maryland and leave everything." I was thinking of Peg and her phone call to Andy Morris, among other things.

"Dexter," LSD said, frowning, "I told you there is nothing more important."

Fitch said, "Aw, hell, Dex. Come on. It'll do you good. I'll even spring you to eats and drinks."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Mr. Fitch," LSD said concernedly. "You will be the guest of Hooten Plastics Corporation."

"Tell you what, Dex," Fitch said. "We'll ride down in my heap and we'll let Mr. Drew buy the eats and drinks. O.K.?"

I was in a bind, of course, but I could see no graceful evasion.

"All right," I said. "But I'm going to eat and drink every mile of the way."

CHAPTER 17

Actually, this trip was not altogether a loss. At least that's what I kept telling myself, slouched as I was in the front seat of Fitch's Dodge and watching Delaware and Maryland pass in review. If nothing else, it gave me a chance, between sporadic surges of conversation, to ponder once again the same tiresome questions. Why, oh, *why*, did I continue to sense that something of extraordinary significance had been muttered—in passing by Balsley Hooten on that first day? What was Dom's role in all this? And Andy's? Who was Lacey working for? And who were the two men Bruce had decked outside Lacey's apartment last night?

And why had Peg called Andy Morris at his office? Especially when it was against her principles to call even me at the office?

A gross departure from the norm, as Old LSD would say.

Peg?

Calling Andy Morris? In a *tizzy*?

Bruce's bland prediction of the night before had been correct. That is to say, it was snowing up a lulu and promised to get worse. As we crossed the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, the sky was the color of a miner's underwear and about as pretty. Angry explosions of wind swayed the car, and the snow swirls were laced with ice that needled the windows and sang a nasty tune under the tires. Fitch didn't say much, being busy at the wheel, and I didn't say much, either, being busy at my qualms. Somewhere beyond the bridge we made a turn to the south and followed a country lane through a wilderness of ghostly scrub pine.

"Not much farther," Fitch muttered.

"You said that when we left Wilmington."

"It's up ahead, around that bend."

"Where do you see a bend? All I see is flying ice cubes."

Fitch ran through a few rapid calisthenics to return us to the road when the Dodge slid momentarily off the right shoulder. Then he said, "Funny thing."

"Funny, hell."

"I mean those cars."

"What cars?"

"All the way from Farnhurst those two cars have been behind us."

I peered over my shoulder. The rear window was only slightly fogged, permitting me a Zhivago's-eye view of the road behind. Sure enough, there were two cars there—one a lump of struggling white

about a half-mile to our stern, the other a ghostly dot that stirred just this side of the vague horizon.

“You sure they’re following us?”

“If they aren’t, we’ve just proved once again that coincidence is stranger than fiction. On a day like this, the fact that three cars could be traveling independently together to this godforsaken hole is a month’s worth of copy for Ripley.”

It was a day of swelling discord, to be sure. I was willing to wager a dime or so that one of the cars was the black Chrysler. But who could be in the other car? And why? That was the *verschlug-giner* rub.

The Missile Propellant Center presented itself as an Army base that was—true to the cliché so dear to the newspaper writers who write of large installations—sprawling. It flung itself in all directions, and its buildings were low and buff-colored and suggestive of poverty scrubbed and broomed. The unquenchable stench of coal smoke lay in the restive air, and somewhere a loudspeaker razzed a Captain Somebody into reporting to a Somewhere, while jeeps and two-and-a-halves blatted and burped busily along thoroughfares bearing noble nameplates: General Pershing Road, General MacArthur Circle, General Eisenhower Avenue, General Jackson Boulevard, General Grant Drive, General Lee Highway, Jacqueline Kennedy Parkway.

Fitch directed the Dodge around a tall flagpole, which twanged like a tuning fork in the gale, and pulled into a parking slot marked Visitors. This was immediately adjacent to a large headquarters building which was immediately adjacent to a large man who beamed at us through the whirling snow and waved a welcome.

"Who he?" I said.

"Johnny Carson," Fitch said, turning the key and giving the motor time off for good behavior.

"Come on—who is he?"

"Johnny Carson. He's a GS-10 civilian who knocks down his seven thousand, nine hundred per by doing all the work that should be done by Barnaby Vernon, the GS-something-or-other who is paid twice as much to be public information officer of this cruddy hole."

"Oh." I paused. Then: "Barnaby Vernon—the guy I met at LSD's recent cocktail orgy?"

"None other than."

"Pompous ass, as we say in the RAF."

"Sure as hell is, as we say in the WCTU."

The big beamer came down the steps, huddled against the gale, to open the car door and heave Fitch to a semistanding position on the icy pavement. They pumped hands.

"Well, well, well," Carson beamed. "Long time no behold. How are you, Mr. Fitch?"

"Grand. That blue thing in there is Paul Dexter, of Hooten Plastics."

"Hi, Mr. Dexter. I'm Johnny Carson."

"Doesn't it bother you to have the same name as a famous TV personality?"

"Hell, no. I had it first. Come on in. Mr. Vernon has been waiting for you in his office."

Barnaby Vernon was an ass even more pompous than I'd remembered. He sat in a high-backed leather chair and struck a pose that suggested it wouldn't be too long before his name would be assigned to one of the streets outside.

"Your name," he intoned, "is not among those which appear on our list of authorized transients,

Mr. Dexter. I therefore hesitate to grant you permission to enter the Center proper."

Irritated, I said, "Well, how about if I enter the Center improper?"

Johnny Carson chuckled (somewhat nervously, I noted) and said in a mediator's manner, "Gosh, Mr. Vernon, all we have to do is write him out a specialist-liaison pass under Section G of Regulation D-10."

Vernon regarded his assistant as if he had just proposed that we all switch wives. "Section G is for technical people only. Scientists. Engineers. Mathematicians. Integrated data processors. Men of intellect and responsible patriotism. Not"—he gave me a covert glance of distaste—"house organ editors."

Carson smiled tentatively in the manner of one who doesn't want to appear disagreeable when he's disagreeing with the boss. "I don't think there's any question of Mr. Dexter's loyalties or intellectual capacities, Mr. Vernon. Besides, Section G, Paragraph 24, Sub-Paragraph H, date of October 2, 1966, as modified June 4, 1967, specifically authorizes press specialist passes for 'public or community relations personnel of Class-A vendors as described in DOD General Order 32-A, Section M, Paragraph 78.' Hooten Plastics is a Class-A vendor and Mr. Dexter is a member of Hooten's Community-Relations Department."

Vernon's face registered regal displeasure at this correction of the throne. "I remind you, Carson, that most of the Center is classified Top Secret and that there are various portions of it that even I am forbidden to enter."

"Sure, Mr. Vernon, but I was just going to take

these gentlemen on the authorized press tour. Section G—”

Vernon lifted an esthetically pink hand. “Spare me further lectures, Carson. I am expecting a call at any moment from the White House. So go on your tour, all of you, and let me turn to my affairs.” He turned in the big swivel chair to gaze out at the snowstorm, a portrait of a man weighed down by the needs of a nation.

Outside in the hall, I asked Carson, “The White House? He actually gets calls from the White House?”

“Sure. The White House Bar and Grill. They always call to confirm Mr. Vernon’s dinner reservations.”

We bucketed along in a winterized jeep whose interior was slightly cooler than dry ice. While Fitch and I shivered and made occasional sounds—not so much to be polite as to reassure ourselves that we were still alive—Carson drove and made cheery little speeches about guided missiles and the contributions they made to the betterment of mankind.

“Hell,” he said, chuckling, “one of them we’re working on here can go halfway around the world, sniff out a pot of borscht from a hundred miles up, and drill right into the soup—erasing everybody and everything in the surrounding thousand acres.”

“Say, that would sure liven up a dull dinner party, wouldn’t it,” I said stiffly. “What have the Russians got—a missile that sniffs out barbecue sauce?”

Fitch shifted his weight on the seat of pain and said nothing.

But old Johnny Carson did. Yessir-ee.

"This installation," he said in the singsong of a barker on a sight-seeing bus, "has, basically, a three-way division of labor and responsibility. First, it evaluates new theories and methodologies through laboratory, thermochemical, and pilot plant studies; second, it manufactures propellants for use by the Army and private contractors working on the Army's missile development programs; and third, it sets up quality control procedures and runs off evaluations of missiles and components unused during tours of duty with troops in the field."

I felt I ought to ask something half intelligent. "Any of your products used at Cape Kennedy?"

Carson laughed and shook his head, making it clear that the question was just about the most unintelligent he had ever heard. "No," he said, "the big space research rockets use highly volatile, supersensitive liquids. They need miles of plumbing and storage equipment that the soldier-boys simply couldn't tote around with them in combat conditions. A military missile has to be a kind of power unto itself, like. A package that can be handled, aimed, and fired with no more fuss than a standard artillery piece calls for. So missiles use solid fuels that are compact, need no external supply sources, and are safe to toss around in rugged conditions."

Carson turned off on a side road leading through a village of low concrete bunkers that squatted gray and frozen in the keening wind. "The ultimate function of any military missile," he burbled, "is to plunk a warhead onto a definite, preselected target. It needs two power sources to work right: one to propel it, another to steer it. We make both kinds here."

“What are the bunkers for?”

“Static testing of missile motors—which, incidentally, we call grains. The grains are lashed down in those concrete bays you see out there by the woods and are fitted with a hundred-some instruments. Guys in the bunkers ignite the grains and record the data gathered during the burning in an acquisition system and computer complex. This way we can make evaluations of grain design and performance we couldn’t get any other way.”

“How do you make the motors, or grains, or whatever the hell they are?” Fitch sounded as if he, too, thought he ought to sound intelligent.

“Well,” Carson chuckled in his irritating good humor, “that’s getting into pretty sensitive areas. But I can give you a general idea. Most of the big propellant grains are produced by the so-called cast double-base process—something like making a gelatin salad. A big plastic mold is filled with casting powder—which would be the Jell-O—then a solvent is added—which would be the water—and then the schmeer is jelled into a solid. The outer skin of the grain is made by rolling sheet plastic into a heat-sealed cylinder reinforced by a fiber glass or steel corset. Most propellant grains burn from the center outward. That means they need interior voids that will permit this inside-out burning. So long metal cores of the right shape are placed upright on a metal plate. The plastic skin and corset is fastened over these. This forms a mold, see? The next step is to add casting powder—a mix of small granules of nitrocellulose and nitroglycerin—to the mold. Then a casting solvent made of nitroglycerin desensitized with Triacetin is forced under air pressure into the mold to fill the small spaces between the casting powder granules.

The filled mold is then cooked in an oven for several days until the whole kaboodle becomes a solid. When the mold cools off finally, the metal cores and corset are removed, leaving the grain inside its plastic skin. The ends of the grain are sawed off and the grain is inserted in a preconditioned metal motor case. The nozzle is attached, the igniter is positioned, and we ship the motor off to the troops for attachment to a warhead."

Fitch made an impatient sound and said, "Tell us about the guidance systems, for God's sake. Before my gender freezes and falls off."

"Oh, yes," Carson said with great amusement. "How do we get the missiles to the borscht, eh? Electric batteries are too bulky and have a shelf life too short for use in combat missiles. So we also make auxiliary power grains—small units that burn slowly from end to end, like cigarettes, during the missile's flight. They generate gases that power turbine-driven generators which, in turn, energize the control and guidance systems."

"How about that."

Fitch said, "Where, in all this gobbledygook, do the Hooten products come in?"

"Oh," Carson chortled, "I can't tell you that. It's secret."

"Well, for God's sake," Fitch snapped, "that's the whole reason we're here. I told you that. In a letter and on the phone."

Carson shook his head. "Sorry. Your dialogues were with Mr. Vernon, not me."

"Sure. But, hell, I thought that when I was talking with the PIO chief I was talking to the horse's mouth."

"I think it's obvious now," Carson smirked, "that you were addressing the wrong end of the

animal. Mr. Vernon doesn't know his regulations, I'm afraid."

In a tiny inspiration I asked, "Is there anybody around who could authorize a nonclassified briefing on Hooten product applications? Like the base commander, or his exec?"

"No, Mr. Dexter, I don't think even they could help on this. The lid is really on this base. Everything is compartmentalized; the guy in one office hasn't the slightest idea of what goes on in the next office. Maximum security covers just about everything we do here. I dare say you could get a better line on Hooten's contributions to our work from your own people at Hooten."

"You mean your base security regulations don't cover the suppliers? You mean you can't talk about the Hooten applications but the Hooten people can?"

Carson laughed again. "Oh, no. It's not that easy. Top Secret is Top Secret all along the line. I'm simply pointing out that Hooten employees aren't nearly as security-conscious as we are here, and therefore they're much more inclined to let things slip now and then. Even those Hooten employees who are directly involved in—and thus regulated by—top secrets and the pertinent regulations."

I peered at him. "You mean like Yenom?"

"Mm. There were no leaks on Yenom here at this base, if that's what you mean. If there was a leak on Yenom—and it certainly appears that there was—it was at Hooten."

"I see."

Carson glanced away from his driving to give me a wink. "I dare say somebody at Hooten is now

quite well-to-do, eh? Loose lips buy blue chips, to paraphrase the old war saying. Haha."

"Well, don't look at me, Mr. Carson. I'm as poor as they come."

"Ha-ha. Then that makes two of us, Mr. Dexter."

Fitch said a dirty word. "I don't mind telling you, Carson, that I don't appreciate your boss letting me come down here on a wild-goose chase like this. So don't be surprised if you and your borscht-busters start getting some bad press."

"I wish I could help you, gentlemen," Carson said apologetically, "but— Well, you know how it is."

"Well, actually," I said, "you've helped me a lot more than you have any idea. And that's a fact."

CHAPTER 18

Home looked pretty good. After Fitch dropped me off at the Admin Building, where I'd left my car, I had visited my office for an hour's examination of the in box. I pulled into the driveway at dusk, when the sky was purple and the snow lay blue and quiet under the hibernating maples. The evening lights were on in the windows and a curl of woodsmoke drifted from the chimney to spice the air with memories of my boyhood. Someday (I thought) in some fine twilight I'll drive up to my house like this and I'll not have one worry or fear or anxiety or anger or resentment or bitterness. I'll be just me and the world will be just the world, the way we were so long ago. And I'll be happy and filled with serenity and wisdom.

And someday, too, my ears will sprout polka-dot petunias, for cripes sake.

Peg was busy in the kitchen—a fact which, although surprising, was welcome. Ordinarily the dinner was steaming and ready for assault when I arrived home, since it was one of Peg's unbendable principles that a wife's duty is to spare her man a long wait for evening sustenance. But tonight, even with my tardiness, she was betwixt and between, all rattling pots and pans. This gave me the opportunity to say my hellos and get through the house to a hot, restorative shower without the ritual of small talk.

When I finally came downstairs, all dewy and pink, I went into the living room to poke up the fire. Billy was great for instigating a log fire but was even more accomplished at disappearing and thus permitting the blaze to foof into an acrid char. So I got things rosy and crackling again and fell into my easy chair, pretending to read the paper but actually going over my lessons of the day.

It had gone better than I'd had any right to expect. By learning nothing I had learned a lot. For one thing—

"Hi," Peg said, entering the room to lift this and that and move them here and there.

"Howdy von doodie, *gnadige Frau*." I vowed to be friendly, her mysterious phone calls notwithstanding.

"Dinner'll be ready in just a minute."

"Good. I'm starved. Some snow today, eh?"

"Mm. I'm glad it stopped. More's due, though, they say."

"What did you do today? Anything special?"

She shrugged, somewhat elaborately, I thought. "Not really. Minah Morris was going to an antique

shop near Lancaster and she asked me to ride along. That's why dinner's a little late."

I snickered.

"What's funny?" she said.

"I was just thinking how lucky Mrs. Morris is not to have married Lyndon Johnson."

"What do you mean?"

"Wouldn't it be awful to go through life being called Minah-Bird?"

She lifted everything and moved it back to where it had been. "How was your day?"

"My day never changes. It just sits there, being disagreeable."

"That's nice."

I folded the paper and laid it on the coffee table. "What's eating you, Peg?"

"Eating me?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing."

"Whenever you wander around a room, lifting things up and putting them down, there's something eating you. What's eating you now?"

"Why, nothing at all." She gave me a smile that was as bright and phony as a Coney Island wrist-watch. "Nothing."

I waited without comment.

She sat on the edge of the sofa, folded her hands in her lap, and examined me with a cool, blue stare. There was a faint flush in her cheeks and I noticed how her fingers twisted and untwisted nervously. "I was just wondering—"

"Wondering about what?"

Her hands unfolded and began smoothening her apron. We both watched the motion as if it were

Adam stirring in the dust. "Are you happy, Dex?" she murmured finally.

"Happy? Sure. Why not?"

"Oh, it's just that—" She faltered again, and I was beginning to do a bit of wondering of my own. I hadn't seen her this diffident, this off-balance, for a long time.

"Come on, Peg. It's just that what?"

"I had a long talk with Minah." She launched a study of her right palm.

"And?"

She made a business of glancing at her watch. "Dinner—"

"Dinner can wait. Now come on. Stop this silly female gobbledy-dobbledy and say what you mean."

My words were brave, meant in part to offset the gathering apprehension. It occurred to me that I was on the brink of an extreme development, a crisis of conscience in which I would be asked to choose between Peg of my heart and Peg of my suspicions. I cursed the morning and its phone call to Morris; it had diverted my jungle wariness into a new and dispiriting channel. Where there had been relief over her innocence in the gossip matter, I could now feel morbid distrust and caution. *Why* had she called Andy? He was a prime suspect in my case. What was her business with him?

But the flicker of anxiety was duplex in character. My willingness to see complicity in my spouse was intermixed with a dreary appreciation of the idiocy I had perpetrated. For a mere holiday in my pedestrian existence, for a giddy excursion into past fulfillments, I had blindly thrown away a job, shaken my modest reputation, and put my family

in jeopardy. I had, in truth, even triggered a slaying, and my mind went to De Quincey: "If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he next comes to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination." God, I anguished silently, what's wrong with me?

She gazed at me directly, her eyes level and serious. "Do you have a mistress, Dex?"

"A *what?*"

"A girl friend. A paramount."

"Paramour."

"What?"

"The word is paramour."

"Well, do you?"

Actually, her line of interrogation was precisely what I needed to dispel the riptide of fear and guilt. I was, in an instant, the injured party; she had become once again the inquisitorial queen mother, the gently tyrannical matriarch who governed by raised eyebrow and lowered voice. Taking strength from the secret knowledge of my technical fidelity, I found it possible to assemble a hurt expression.

"Now what makes you ask that?"

"You didn't say no, so I assume you do."

"I didn't say no because I shouldn't have to, damn it."

"Don't start swearing at me. I can stand anything but vile language."

"I'm not swearing at you. I'm just showing signs of my emotional immaturity." I was beginning to sound sarcastic again, and I didn't want this; it could, if permitted to wax unchecked, reverse the

roles and make her the injured party. "What makes you think I have a paramount?"

"Minah, because she's a good, true friend, tells me that there's talk about how you have some kind of liaison going." Her voice dropped to a whisper, and she kept peering over her shoulder, presumably to be sure the kids weren't listenting in. "She says they say you've been seen at that place they call The Birches."

"Yeah, that Minah is sure a good friend, all right," I said, choking in my tight choler.

"Well, she is. It took a lot of courage on her part to tell me something like that."

"It took a lot of nerve, that's for sure. But it's truly baloney. Can't you see the absurdity of it all?"

"You didn't go to the printer's Monday, like you said."

"Of course I did. What makes you think I didn't?"

Her lower lip was trembling now. "That round and blonde and adoring little secretary of yours called the house. She said she called the printer's but you weren't there, and she wondered did I know just where you might be. She said it was very important. You weren't at the printer's, were you? You were visiting your lady friend at The Birches."

"Hoo-boy."

"Where did you go, Dex? Was it The Birches?"

"I was at the printer's in the morning. In the afternoon I had to run a special errand."

"What errand?"

"I can't say. Confidential company business."

We fell into one of those taut silences, and I

struggled to maintain my air of pain over the injustice that was being worked on me. But it wasn't possible, because I was so ashamed of myself.

"Dex."

"What?"

"You aren't happy, are you." This was not a question.

"I'm not very happy at this particular moment in the Atomic Age, no."

"I mean, you're not happy with me."

"I am so. I love you."

She took a deep breath. "I can't really blame you, I guess. I haven't been much of a wife in these past years. I—"

"You're one hell of a wife. Now cut out the baloney, hear?" There was the heavy sense of things coming apart.

She examined both of her hands this time, and her eyes were deep and thoughtful. "*Woman and Home* magazine says that if a husband errs the wife should first look at herself for the reasons."

"Why don't those smart alecks mind their own damned business?"

"Well, I have," she said in that tiny voice. "Looked at myself, that is. And it's not a pretty picture. I've been self-centered and willful and narrow and all wrapped up in my little world. I haven't thought about you at all—"

"That's not so. You think of me a lot. You're always telling me to do this and that. And you always say please. Well, almost always. And—"

"That's just the point," she said. "I'm always telling you. Never asking you. Never treating you like you were dry between the shoulders. Always do this, do that."

"And I love every lousy minute of it—"

She began to cry, and she came across the room and fell on me and got tears in my ears and sobbed, "I've thrown away my husband."

"Baloney. Just trust me, Peg. Trust me."

She collapsed against me again and I was patting her back and whispering things when Billy walked in.

"What you doin'? Neckin'?"

"Ah—"

"My generation calls it makin' out."

Peg sat up quickly, alternately rubbing her eyes and straightening her clothes.

"What's for dinner, Mom?"

"Pork chops," she managed, heading for the kitchen.

"Yecch."

Billy dismissed his mother and gave me his attention. "Hey, Dad, I heard something real far-out today."

"Oh? So what did you hear?" I asked, my belabored intuition telling me I would not like the answer.

He belly flopped on the sofa, rolled on his back, and began tossing a pillow. "I was talkin' with Doug in gym."

"You mean Doug Whitcomb down the block?"

"Yeah. He's a drag. But he was standin' next to n ., and when Mr. Dubnik gave us a rest period we got to talkin', Doug and me. He said he was buildin' a hideout under his porch just before Christmas and he was under there puttin' down some boards for a floor when a car pulls up in front of his house and this cat gets out and comes up and rings the doorbell and his ma answers the door and this cat

starts askin' all sorts of questions about you—is Mr. Dexter this, is Mr. Dexter that, how long has Mr. Dexter lived where he does, is Mr. Dexter a good neighbor, is Mr. Dexter a drinkin' man, where does Mr. Dexter go nights and like that—and his ma says if the guy wants to know all that stuff why doesn't he go ask Mr. Dexter and it's a fine howdy-do when sneaky men go around askin' sneaky questions about a nice fella like Mr. Dexter and what's this world comin' to, anyhow?"

I felt Peg's horrified stare from the doorway.

"Oh?" I said. "That's queer, all right. But there are all kinds of nuts around these days. Maybe—He was probably checking my credit. Credit people are always checking people's credit."

"What's credit?"

"It's pretty complicated. And you've got to wash up. So get with it."

Forgetting the subject at once, he rolled onto the floor, shot an imaginary basket with the pillow, and, careening from the room, took to the stairs with the quiet grace of a King Tiger tank.

Dinner was very tense.

I had a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk and listened to the clock announce 11:00 P.M. Except for this (and the oil furnace humming contentedly in its effort to make me go broke), the house was silent. Peg had spent the evening at her sewing, preoccupied and distant. The kids, seeming to sense that something important was transpiring in Parentsville, had done their homework without prodding, watched a show that shook the house with ricochets and grenade blasts, and turned in

with no more than token bickering and door-slamming. All of which was fine with me.

While tidying up the kitchen, I was aware of a new inspection. Peg was watching me from the hall. She was wrapped in her quilted robe, and her hair was tousled and her eyes were cloudy with thought.

"Hello," I said. "I thought you were asleep."

She brushed away a lock of hair with the back of a hand and said, "You haven't forgotten Munich, have you?"

"Do you honestly think I could forget that?"

"You were almost killed."

"That was a long time ago."

"It's happening again, isn't it," she said, making a statement of the question as she always did.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't have a lady friend. You're working on a case."

"How could I be? I'm on inactive reserve."

"Maybe not like before. But somebody from before, somebody from Munich, is pushing you, isn't he?"

"You mean that credit man? Come on, now."

"I don't want it to happen again. I'd go out of my rocker."

"For God's sake, forget it, will you?"

"How can I—when you're acting so suspicious and all."

I felt a stirring of annoyance. I wanted to confront her with her tizzy call to Andy Morris and ask her where she got off, calling me suspicious. But I didn't. I said rather: "It's nothing, Peg. A silly series of coincidences that have booted you right in the memory box. Forget it."

“You were almost killed that time.”

She stared at me for a time, then turned slowly and disappeared into the gloom of the hall. I heard her climbing the stairs.

The house continued its noisy silence, and I stood by the sink, listening, feeling more rotten than I had ever felt in my life.

CHAPTER 19

There had been much to cause me anguish in recent days, but of all my trials I think the most obstructive was my inability to talk things out with someone. In olden times, sticky going would often find me locked in the Operations Room of the safe house on Friedenheimerstrasse, where I would walk up and down, talking at Jerry Hochmann, my case officer at Munich Region Four. Jerry would perch on the red cushion that padded the window seat at the high casement, smelling up the room with his pipe and listening while I would number all the reasons why I should desert the Counter Intelligence Corps and take on work more suited to my talents, such as running a U-Drive-It Zeppelin agency in Brattleboro, Vermont.

But the act of speaking had served uncannily to loosen logic, to put my brains where my mouth was. I would prattle along and Jerry would con-

tribute little grunts here and there. And when Jerry knocked out his pipe, I'd know I had somehow hit some crazy, silent gong that dropped the sword that cut the knot that some Gordian of the moment had tied. Jerry would stuff his pipe into a pocket, wink, and say in a stage whisper, "Heigh-O, Silver—Away!" And I'd toddle off and eventually clean up the whole rotten business and feel the fool because it had taken me so long to see the light.

I had no Jerry in this present potpourri, though, and it could have been subconscious yearning for one that led me into the Admin Building cafeteria for a cup of coffee and whatever fellowship might show itself.

I was inexplicably stimulated today—the way you feel when you awaken and look at the day and sense that something important is going to happen. A tiny corner of intellect told me that I was on the verge of something and, gazing around the antiseptic room, with its air of yesterday's bananas and crabcake sandwiches and its gabbling clientele and the THINK posters scrounged from IBM, I wondered what.

Picking up a coffee, I sat at a table occupied by approximately one person—Abner Quigg, an accounting assistant with white hair, a receding chin, and a lapel pin that proved he had been a deacon of Hootenville Bible Presbyterian Church for twenty years. I knew that he had long considered me to be a mixed nut.

"Hi, Abner," I said around a sip. "Happy Thursday morning."

"Hello, Mr. Dexter. I haven't seen you much lately. What have you been up to?"

"Not much, Ab. Working as a counterspy, mostly."

"A what?"

"Old Hooten-Nanny thinks there's a spy in our offices, and I'm on special assignment to find out who it is."

"Oh, really? Ha-ha. Mr. Hooten's got me on special assignment, too. I'm going to be the company's entry in the Miss America contest. Hee-hee."

"In my attempt to entice the spy who's penetrated Mr. Hooten, I've uncorked an old Army Intelligence technique and have set myself up as a moral degenerate." I took another sip. "I've become a famous swinger."

"My, my. Sounds exciting. Ha-ha."

"And as a result I've been followed all over town by two men in a Chrysler; I've consorted with an underworld supply man; I've been shot at; I've taken a doxie to a motel and watched her get extremely murdered; I've been blackmailed by a prominent merchant; and I'm now involved in the capital crime of kidnapping."

Abner's skinny shoulders shook, his glasses bounced on his waxy nose, and his false teeth clacked with his merriment. Abner was a man who relished a good laugh, by God—probably because he got so few. "You're sure a card, Mr. Dexter. You really are. Ha-ha. You should write TV shows. Hoo-hoo. Have you decided who the, ha-ha, spy is?"

"It would seem to be the merchant, assisted by our chief counsel, Andy Morris. Who, incidentally, also looks like the one who tried to put a bullet in my hairdo."

"Ha-ha-ha. Oh, hee-hee-hee. Hoo. Ha-ha. Hee-hoo."

"There are some very peculiar things about all this—apart and beyond all the obvious, ordinary peculiar things. For instance, there is no reason, as far as I can see, why Balls Hooten ever bothered to put a little boy like me on a man's job. But there must be a reason. And I have only the vaguest kind of hunch about what it might be. No, not a hunch. Hunch is too precise a word, too dignified for what I have. And then there's all the shooting. Why would any skilled, sensible, emotionally balanced, and responsible criminal want to murder anybody for a lousy rundown on a lousy industrial product?"

I paused, thinking.

"There must be a stupendous dollar bill in all this . . ."

"Oh, ho-ho-ho. Balls. Oh, hee-hoo-ha-ho. Balls." Abner dabbed at his eyes with his necktie. "Oh, you are the craziest kidder I've ever known, Mr. Dexter. A card. A real card. I might say you're the whole deck. Ah-oh-ho-ho. Get it? The whole *deck*. Hee-hoo-ha."

I lifted my cup and was staring at its contents when it happened again.

Just as before.

Just as if I'd been pacing the length of the Ops Room in Munich.

This thing I called a hunch. Or not quite a hunch. It was now no longer something just south of a hunch—it was a full-blown idea. No, not an idea. A solution.

I peered into my cup some more.

Penetrated.

The spy who has penetrated us, Balsley Hooten had said.

And I'd said the word.

Penetrated. And I was moved from smog to sunshine.

I shut out the clucking little sobs of laughter that still shook Miss America and thought very hard.

Yes.

It had to be.

What other explanation was there?

None, that's what. It had to be that way.

Remarkable, I thought, how very neatly all my preparatory work fell into the pattern. Almost as if instinct had been clunking along, adjusting things, independent of the wallowing indirection of my conscious.

One thing for sure: I'd have to move fast. Praying for luck all the way.

I became quite excited.

I went into my office and shut the door and stood staring about the room. If my solution was correct, there had to be at least one here. Maybe two. But one, at least. Where?

First things first, eh?

I sat down at my desk and, with the large end of a nail file, I unscrewed the baseplate on my telephone, whistling loudly as I worked.

A sugar lump mike, sure enough. One of those standard ploys I had come long ago to disdain as being trite, like putting the front door key under the mat or in the mailbox.

But this one was a little beauty. It probably served as a combination mike and transmitter, triggered when the phone was lifted from its cradle, or perhaps by the sound of voices alone. Whichever, it was sure to radio phone conversations or office chitchat to a listening post or a tape recorder

somewhere within several hundred yards of my desk. My guess was that the location was within the office building itself.

After reassembling the phone, I took a few minutes to scout the rest of the office, running my fingers under the desk rim, examining drawers, peering behind the story status board, removing and replacing all the reference books in the three-bay bookcase, even going over the coat-tree in the corner. Then I went aloft, checking out the ceiling light fixtures and the wall hangings.

It was in the air outlet—that grille of metallic squares I had counted so many times.

A standard microphone and wire. A wire that could lead virtually to any cubbyhole in the Admin Building, the R and D Building, or even to the plant down the hill. It would take a lineman two days to trace this, maybe, and not only was I not a lineman, I did not have two days.

No matter. The bugs provided *prima facie* proof of my solution.

The unimpeachable proof, however, would lie elsewhere, and I permitted myself some time to consider the alternate routes to its acquisition. I could, of course, wade in directly, collecting a considerable entourage in the process. Or I could make a line-buck feint and then fade for an end run, leaving myself alone en route for a touchdown. I favored the latter, though it would clearly amount to a wise-guy, grandstand play.

But I had earned the right to shine a bit, by God.

I had been a patsy—a mouse—for so long it was now my privilege to stand and roar.

Heart accelerating, I consulted the phone book, then dialed the number.

"Birches," a switchboard voice said.

"Carl Koster, please."

"One moment."

"Doorman."

"Carl?"

"Yeah?"

"Dexter."

There was a tiny pause. Then: "I sort of expected to hear from you."

"What'll we do?"

"Do?"

"Now that our, ah, mutual associate is among the missing, I mean."

"Sit tight, that's what we do."

"Well, I'm worried. With him missing, I don't know where I stand. Personally, that is."

"Relax, pal. We'll get some instructions right soon. Meantime, you ain't got nothing to fret about. So our boss is AWOL. So we get another. When we do I'll call you."

I dropped my voice to a very confidential level. "I wonder if you'd give me a hand with something tonight. I have a chance to bust into the place where they keep a complete rundown on what our mutual friend was interested in."

"Sorry, pal. I got a prior commitment. I can't break it."

"Don't you want to get the goods on you-know-what?"

"Me, I don't rush things. Besides, the you-know-what is your problem, not mine."

"Well, to hell with you, then. I'll bust in here tonight by myself."

"Be my guest."

"To hell with you." I slammed down the phone, smiling privately.

That should do it.

By now everybody on the party line would surely be making plans to be on hand when the Great Hooten Plastics Burglary took place.

I almost laughed aloud.

Instead I went to the lobby pay phone and called Schwartz the bartender. In four minutes Harlan Stokes called back. He agreed to meet me at his office at three o'clock. The tools, he said, would be there.

CHAPTER 20

Sunlight did a lot for Hefflefinger's Bar and Grill—all of it bad. The windows, opaque with years of grime, glinted dully in the lemon glare; the sagging timbers and fake bricks and posters touting long-forgotten prizefights took on a ghastly hue, as if the whole ratty pile had succumbed to some unspeakable disease. A very inviting place, if you happened to be an unemployed cockroach bumming your way south.

I parked the Renault at the railroad station and walked the two blocks. Schwartz was on guard duty at the mahogany barricade, as fat and mean as ever, and Cleo had renounced solitaire for a crossword puzzle. The only note of welcome I received as I headed for the stairway was from the jukebox, which sighed, clicked, and gave me a purple blink.

Bruce, too, was manning his post.

"Easy, Bruce, easy," I said, holding up a hand in the gloom. "Mr. Stokes expects me."

"I know. Go on in, pal."

Stokes was still under his dusty derby and behind his dusty desk, and it seemed to me that he hadn't moved a silly millimeter since I'd seen him last.

"Hi," I said.

"Mr. Dexter. Good to see you again. Sit down, won't you?"

"No thanks. You have the tools?"

"My, such an impatient fellow. No sparring amenities. Right to the point."

"I didn't come to socialize, Mr. Stokes."

He waved a hand at the closet. "The kit is in there. Do you mind fetching it? I'm a bit out of sorts today. Bursitis."

I fetched it and it was a dandy. There was a nicely balanced complement of electronics—a Bigelow listener, a tray of cough drop beepers and their pickups, an assortment of sugar lump mikes, a phone tap of the wireless type. In pockets laced into the lid and sides were additional little touches: jimmies, shims, glass mufflers, cutters, skeletons, tappers, jeweler's saw, screws, needle-nose pliers, dust applicators, plastic wood, and vials of wood stain—those items that let you break and enter and leave without a trace. And all of it in a satchel not much larger than my attaché case. Neat.

Stokes stirred and said, "You are a sophisticate, Mr. Dexter. You must be planning something very big."

"Could be. What's the tab on all this?"

"Two hundred dollars a day."

"Shee."

"It's a bargain, Mr. Dexter."

"Can I put it on my bill? I mean, does my thousand-dollar binder still hold for the tool rental?"

"Of course."

I closed the kit and said, "I don't want to rent a Hertz or Avis job here in town. Their rental records make a trace. How about you? Do you have a car I can use for a day or so?"

"Certainly." He raised his head and called, "Bruce!"

"Yeah, boss?"

"Where's the Corvair?"

"In the garage."

Stokes looked at me. "Where would you like to pick it up? And when?"

"Have it at the corner of Fourth and Morane by five o'clock. Put the keys under the front seat."

"Can you arrange that, Bruce?" Stokes murmured.

"I guess so. But I'll have to get at it right away. It needs gas and oil, and one of the snow tires needs a new one."

Stokes stood up and stretched. "Well," he sighed, "get at it then. I'm leaving anyhow, so you won't be needed here."

Ah. This, I sensed, was my opportunity to conduct a little business I'd been wanting to take care of all along. I glanced at my watch and said, "Say, is there a john around?"

"Two doors down the hall, Mr. Dexter. Help yourself. You don't mind if Bruce and I don't wait, do you?"

"Not at all. Five o'clock, then, Bruce?"

"The car'll be there, just like you want it."

"Good show, old chap."

I went into the toilet, a room the size of a

one-gallon milk carton, and waited until I heard Stokes and Bruce reach the first floor. When they were gone, I stepped quickly and quietly to the far end of the hall, placed the burglar tools in a dark corner, and eased my way up the stairway to the third floor.

Luck was with me. The man—tall, crew-cut, and surprisingly elegant in a well-fitted sharkskin suit and sparkling cordovans—was preparing to set fire to a cigarette. I waited until the flare of the Zippo filled his eyes. Then, in two fast steps I closed the gap and delivered a karate chop that laid him peacefully in my arms. Dragging him slowly so as to keep the noise to a minimum, I managed to get him into the janitor's closet near corridor's end. I took the snub-nosed revolver from his shoulder holster and put it in my pocket.

I could have saved myself the trouble. There was nobody on duty in the girlie-service office. And that's all it was—an office. A desk, a typewriter, two phones, a couple of funeral home chairs, a pair of file cabinets with nothing in them, and a calendar illustrated by a bare-bottomed broad standing in a lily pond and pursing her lips in an oo. I paused to stare at her tokus while I thought things over. And then, coming to a conclusion or two, I went out and retrieved the guard.

I propped him in one of the chairs and slapped him awake. After his eyes went around a few times like the cherries on a slot machine, they slowed to a halt at dead center and took on a semblance of focus.

"What the hell's the idea?" he mumbled thickly.

I held the .38 under his chin and said, "Prepare to meet thy Maker."

His eyes were alert now, and I could sense that

he was thinking very fast. "You must have the wrong guy. I don't even know you."

"I don't know you, either. But I know one thing: You have a buddy who drives a black Chrysler. He's been following me. Therefore he's been annoying me. Therefore he's going to die. Therefore so are you."

"You must be out of your skull, mister. If you want Hank why take it out on me? I haven't been following you."

I nodded reasonably. "I'll make you a deal. You tell me who Hank is and what he's after and I'll forget I ever saw you. How's that?"

He licked his lips and did some more fast thinking. "Well," he said finally, "O.K. But how do I know you'll forget me?"

"That's something you'll probably lose a lot of sleep over in the weeks ahead. If you accept the deal, that is. If you don't, you'll be sleeping until the roll is called up yonder."

He blinked slowly, then said, "It's Hank Brewster. We run a girlie service. Hank heard you were in the market for a playmate. It's his idea—his, not mine, pal—to get you from both ends. Supply you with a broad and then put the bite on you to keep quiet about it."

"Oh. Besides being a pimp he's also a petty blackmailer, eh?"

"Like I told you: he is, I ain't."

With no further ceremony, I hit him a good one with the gun and he went down like the *Titanic*. With some scissors from the desk drawer I sliced his coat sleeves into strips, gagged him, and tied him to the chair. I typed a note and paper-clipped it to his lapel: *Hank, old buddy: Sorry I missed you. I won't next time, though. Dex-baby.*

I threw the revolver into a wastebasket and walked out.

I arrived home at 4:00 P.M., only to find no one there. A break. At least it saved explanations and face-to-face lies.

It would have been more to my liking, naturally, to avoid the use of cars altogether and hop a bus. But I had all this gear—burglar tools, the electronics, an overnight bag with my shaving equipment and pajamas and other intimates—as well as a large suitcase with the clothes and the phony phone items. These latter constituted one of those spur-of-the-moment ideas you get once in a while. My intention had been to pose as a salesman, but while rooting through the attic for my surgeon's gloves (you never know what you might need), I unearthed the GI field phone Sam Delaney had left with me before he'd been killed in the Boondock Affair back in '48. I should have returned the phone to S-4 at Oberursel, but I'd never got around to it. Anyhow, the phone had ended up in my attic, and when I saw it there in the old footlocker, I got this inspiration. After thinking it over for a time, I had formally dropped the salesman idea.

So I wrote a note telling Peg I'd be in New York overnight, then drove the Renault to the parking lot at Fourth and Morane Streets and buckled myself into the cockpit of Stokes's blue Corvair.

It had begun to snow again—a powdery snow mixed with wind.

I drove out of town on Harrison Avenue, that Boulevard of Broken Schemes—failing drive-ins, insolvent garages, run-down lumberyards, and marginal used car lots all succumbing to the sly

infiltration of time and weeds. At Route 100 I turned south and kept up a steady pace until I reached the West Chester bypass and 202. In another half hour I had cleared Wilmington and was on the Kennedy Memorial Highway.

I had not been followed. Which was precisely what I had worked so hard to assure.

I put up at a motel on the west side of Baltimore and had a late supper at the diner across the road. Then I returned to my room and rested on the bed until the house phone rang and the innkeeper told me my cab was waiting. The ride to the airport seemed endless, but we finally arrived and sure enough, the Supreme Truck Rental Company had a new tan panel job awaiting my pleasure.

I took a circuitous route back to the motel, stopping en route under a lonely streetlight at the edge of a swamp to apply the forty stickum-backed letters I had scrounged from Billy's model airplane supply cupboard. Twenty neat sans-serif letters to each door just below window level:

TELEPHONE MAINTENANCE

CHAPTER 21

Fortunately the diner across from the motel was one of those all-night places and, as a consequence of its location on Route 40, it was surrounded all night by a small army of cars and trucks. It was in a shadowed backwater of this army that I parked the panel truck, recognizing that a telephone maintenance vehicle—especially one with its letters stickumed on in slightly imperfect alignment—would be cause for considerable curiosity on the part of the innkeeper, were he to spot it directly outside my digs.

I spent some time going over my plans and arranging my gear in order of need. About midnight, when the motel population had settled down for a long winter's rut, I carried the gear across the road, locked it in the truck, then treated myself to a coffee. I was growing tense by this time and this, coupled with the incessant traffic that blattered

down the highway, made my night's sleep about as deep and refreshing as a catnap in the Holland Tunnel.

In the postdawn snowstorm I showered and shaved, dressed in my old Army khakis and tan zipper jacket, then drove the Corvair into the diner's rear parking lot so that, again, the motel manager would have no cause to wonder why I was away all day while my car wasn't. After a tasteless breakfast I clambered into the panel truck for the next stage of Operation Hoo-Boy.

The Armbruster Company's corporate headquarters was a large arrangement of yellow brick and aluminum slabs resembling a lemon layer cake that had been on the shelf too long. It fronted on a wide band of freshly plowed concrete called Division Highway and, except for the towering, pipey structures of the plant brooding beyond its shoulder, it was the tallest building in the generally ragtag assortment of warehouses, gas stations, and dime-a-glass beer joints comprising the neighborhood. Compared with this melancholy edifice, the Administration Building of Hooten Plastics Corporation was a regular Rockefeller Center.

Shortly after 9:00 a.m., I pulled up to the snowbank across Division Highway from the layer cake's main entrance—parking at an angle that would exhibit, without revealing their oddly temporary nature, the letters on my truck's left hip. Affecting that bored grace manifested by all men of skill when they prepare to go to work, I strapped on the GI pistol belt—one of those web things with the brass-lined holes spotted around—and affixed to it my collection of phony phone tools. The phone itself, which I had disengaged

from the field pack, I hung at my side. Jingling and jangling, I carried the satchel full of folded clothes, electronic gear, and burglar tools across the road and up the steps and into the dark brown reception room.

I nodded at the chesty blonde behind the counter and said, in the bored voice used by all men of skill when they prepare to go to work, "Telephone maintenance."

She stifled a yawn with the back of a pink little fist and said, "May I see your work order?"

I had expected this, of course, and so my eyes had been very busy with the directory hanging by the door to the right of the reception counter. Happily I spotted at once the name of Hamilton McCorkle and the fact that his office was on the third floor. Since he was director of Armbruster's legal department, he was top brass and therefore likely to have an office at or near the heart of Executive Row.

"Work order?" I said in my bored voice. "What means a work order? I'm not here for you people, I'm here for us people."

The blonde shrugged and said, "You got to have a work order. That's rules. Nobody fusses around the building without he's got a work order."

I stifled a yawn of my own. "Orders, shmorders. I ain't no Armbruster employee. My boss tells me we got trouble on our equipment on your third floor and I should go fix it. So I go fix it."

"You got to have a work order signed by our Mr. Cootch," she said, her jaw growing determined.

"So get me Mr. Cootch on the line, honey."

She opened a drawer behind the counter, dropped her gaze to consult something, and blinked twice. She picked up her phone and dialed, her blue

button eyes wandering out the door toward my truck. She blinked again, then said, "Mr. Cootch? Gert. A telephone man's here, wants to talk to you." She handed me the instrument.

"Mr. Cootch?"

"Yes?" a gentle little voice said.

"Telephone man here. We got trouble with a junction box on your third floor and I'm here to check out the system up there."

"Oh?" Mr. Cootch said with an air of polite concern. "Is it serious?"

"Well, yeah. Your third floor could be without phones two, maybe three days. If your third-floor activity ain't important I can come back some other time when all the phones kick out. O.K.?"

I could hear Mr. Cootch swallow. "Oh, my heavens, no. We couldn't have that. All our company officers are quartered on the third floor."

"Well," I said, "whatever you want. You want I should fix it now you tell Gert, eh?"

"Put her on the line, please."

I returned the phone to the blonde and stood whistling between my teeth while she eyed the ceiling and absorbed the static that came out of the receiver. She nodded, said yes, sir, and hung up.

"You may go up to the third floor," she told me, her tone sulky with the day's first defeat. Lips pursed, she scribbled on a work order form and gave it to me.

"Thanks, Gert." I hesitated, then asked, "Which way is up?"

Having already dismissed me as a problem, she pointed, wordlessly apathetic, to a stairway in the far corner of the lobby.

I was under way, and with the issue joined (as

they say in all those history books), it had become time to risk my all.

In contradiction to the building's outer seediness, Armbruster's third floor presented a garish opulence that would have done credit to a Ginger Rogers-Fred Astaire extravaganza. Shindeep carpets, billowing draperies, planters filled with real flora, soft lamplight, plush divans that could have slept six each, and piped music were the most unpleasant things about it. What with my khakis and junk jewelry, I stood out like a tarantula sauntering through a bridal bouquet. Which was all right. If you're going to play a role, play it in the grand, heroic manner. You might be thrown out of the theater, but they won't forget you.

Moving down the long axis of this study in corporate overhead, I read the nameplates mounted regally beside each of the heavy flush doors. It was a stroke of luck to discover that Armbruster's officers had elected to make this area a general waiting room and to house their secretaries in a buffer zone behind the doors. This left only one person for me to confront out here—a haughty Edna Mae Oliver type in a flowered suit and pince-nez who presided at a desk at the far end. I continued to whistle between my teeth as I approached her.

"Hi," I said, flashing my newly won work order slip. "Telephone man. Mr. Cootch says it's real important. Trouble on the kolopsis linkage between McCorkle and Armbruster."

"Oh?" the tall old lady said through her nose. "Odd. Neither Mr. Armbruster nor Mr. McCorkle has complained of phone trouble."

"Naturally. It ain't happened yet. I'm here to see it don't."

"Well, do it quickly and quietly, young man. We can't permit any inconvenience to either gentleman."

"Important guys, eh?"

She examined me frostily, as if she had just discovered that I wore limburger hair dressing. "Very important indeed, young man. Mr. Armbruster is our president and chairman of the board. Mr. McCorkle is director of Legal Affairs." A buzzer burped politely at her elbow and, snapping a button, she leaned to one side and burbled, "Yes, Mr. Armbruster?"

Yackle-dackle arder-barder.

"Yes, Mr. Armbruster." She paused, then crooned, "Oh, Mr. Armbruster—There's a man from the phone company here at the request of Mr. Cootch. It seems there is trouble on your connection with Mr. McCorkle."

Arder-barder-yackle-dackle.

"Yes, Mr. Armbruster." She snapped the button again and gave me a severe glance. "You may go in, young man."

"Thanks, doll." I winked at her, then strolled unhurriedly across the beige nylon veldt to the door marked Mr. Armbruster. Pushing through, I fell under the immediate scrutiny of two glossy women bashing away at electric typewriters. I gave a low whistle and said, "Hoo-boy. Some guys get all the luck."

They blushed, and became very absorbed in their work. I went through the inner door, which put me in an office roughly the size of the Houston Astrodome. Far across the nylon plain I could make out a desk and, behind this, a fat, bald little man

wearing eyeglasses so heavy and so black they looked like a bandit's mask. He appeared to be writing furiously.

"Hi, Mr. President," I said. "Trouble on the old Ameche, eh?"

He peered at me over his mask. "Ameche?"

"Yeah. You know: Don Ameche. He played Alexander Graham Bell in a movie. It's an old gag, to call a phone a Ameche. Ha-ha."

"Well, fix it," he grumped, going back to his penmanship.

"Yes, Your Presidency."

I waded across the carpet to the desk, which mounted three phones—two of them obviously company long-distance tie lines, the other a standard direct-dialing job leading to the world at large. Taking up this last, I unscrewed the baseplate and stood staring at the innards, shaking my head solemnly. "Oh-oh," I said. "This calls for immediate surgery."

Mr. Armbruster gave me a quick dirty look, then went on writing. Over his shoulder I could see it was something headed: *Gladys—My Darling, My Angel*. Good. A man concentrates on passion. I opened my burglar kit and extracted the Muller cough drop transmitter, which I fastened to a wall of the phone chassis. Then, for good measure, I placed a sugar lump under the rim of the desk to catch intercom discussions.

"What's the McCorkle extension, Your Honor?"

Mr. Armbruster abandoned Gladys long enough to give me a withering stare. "Two-one-one," he rasped. "Say, how long are you going to be, anyhow? I'm a busy man."

"You want your phone to conk out?" I held the phone to my ear.

"Well, of course not," he snapped.

"Then what's with the impatience? It'll take as long as it takes. No more, no sooner. You don't give the doctor a bad time when he peeps down your gullet, do you? You like him to take time to be sure everything's working right down there in the machinery, don't you? Well, then, you ought to respect your phone like you respect your gizzard. After all, what's more important in life than a good, healthy phone?"

"Look—"

"Shh." I waved a warning finger. "Hear that?"

He blinked owlishly and listened as I held the phone out to him. "All I hear is the dial tone," he whispered.

"Sounds sorta peaked, though, don't it?"

"Well—"

"Bad sign, that. It's good that you got me here in time." I closed up the instrument, sighed and said, "This McCorkle character. Where's he hang out?"

Mr. Armbruster sighed, too, and pointed vaguely. "Down the hall. Suite D, or something. There's a sign by his door."

"O.K. Now when you use that phone be gentle. Don't go dialing fast and hard, don't jiggle the buttons to get the operator, don't slam down the receiver. Treat it the way you'd want to be treated yourself. If it shows signs of having a relapse in a day or two, call me."

He regarded me sourly. "Is it all right if I make calls on it?"

"Yeah. But as I say: Easy does it. O.K.?"

He muttered an obscenity.

I returned to the waiting room, gave the tall old lady another wink, and continued on to a corridor

that angled away from the head of the stairs. Suite D, occupied by Hamilton McCorkle, was the second door down. Three more doors, and then another door bearing the legend "Gentlemen." I entered this one and found with pleasure that there were no gentlemen present. Locking myself in a booth, I quickly stripped to my underwear, then pulled on my blue suit (thank God it was the permanent press variety) and shoved the khakis into the satchel. A soft Oxford cloth shirt and a clip-on tie returned me altogether to civilian life. And not too soon, either, because a gentleman entered. I waited quietly until he had washed up and left, then I took out the activator box, clicked the button three times, and heard the beep. There was the sound of a phone lifting and a young voice said, "Mr. Armbruster's office."

"Is he in, please?" I said into the penny-size speaker.

"Who's calling, please?"

"Alfred Furz, Department of Justice."

"Oh? May I ask the purpose of your call, Mr. Furz?"

"You may not."

"Well, Mr. Armbruster is extremely busy, and—"

"This is government business." I sounded officially sore.

"One moment, please."

Click, buzz, snap.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Armbruster?"

"Yes."

"Al Furz, Department of Justice, Antitrust Division."

There was a moment of horrified silence at the other end. Eventually Mr. Armbruster said in a

strangled voice, "Oh, yes. What can I do for you, Mr.—ah—"

"Furz. I'm in your first-floor reception room and on my way up to look over your file on the Polykleer plastic. Washington is interested in the background on this product—possible matter of *torts in re sinus*."

This silence was so horrified it was hard on the ears. Then: "I see. Well, I think it would be well for you to chat with Mr. Hamilton McCorkle in Suite D. He's our attorney and has custody of such files. I—ah—Torts?"

"I'll see him right away. Suite D, you say?"

"Ah— Yes."

I snapped the switch to simulate a phone hanging up.

I waited.

Then came the sound of Armbruster's phone dialing 211. Very fast.

"Yes, Army?" a pompous voice said.

"Jesus to Jesus to *Jesus*, Ham!" Armbruster rasped. "An Antitrust guy. Right here in the *building*. God! On his way to see you this very *minute*! Oh, God!"

"What about, Army? For God's sake, what *about*?"

"The Polykleer file. He wants to *look* at it!"

"No. Oh, no. My God, Army. He couldn't have come at a worse time."

"You're telling *me*? Jesus. Can't you be out of town or something?"

"It wouldn't do any good. He can order anybody to produce it if he wants to be nasty. Probably has a subpoena-of-documents order right in his hand."

"Jesus. The Hooten papers— Are they in the file?"

"Of course they are. Right here in my confidential file."

"Well, *remove* them from the file. Hide them. Burn them. Eat them. Brewster told us nobody—but *nobody*—is to see those papers!"

"I'll have Miss Jasper take them down to Archives. That's the best I can do right now."

"Well, goddam it, do it!"

They rang off, and I was quite pleased. I hurried out of the booth, placed my satchel and phone gear in a corner, then moved into the corridor in time to see the door of Suite D swish open and eject a round little brunette with a folder in her hands. Stepping quickly, I managed to bump into her and knock the papers to the floor.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, miss," I flustered. "How clumsy of me. Here— Let me help." I stooped, gathered up the sheaf of legal-size sheets, and stuffed them back in the folder. As I passed the lot back to her I slid a Jensen beeper under one of the paper clips.

"Well—" she huffed, adjusting her skirt.

"Are you O.K.?"

She didn't bother to answer but went careening down the hall to the stairs. She went down them, I noted. Not up.

So far so good.

I went into Hamilton McCorkle's office.

CHAPTER 22

There was only one girl in attendance here, the other desk showing clear signs of the brunette's panicky departure. I assumed a G-man-type face and announced, "Alfred Furz to see Mr. McCorkle."

"Oh, yes, sir," the chemical blonde breathed. "He's expecting you." She held out a hand to indicate the inner door.

I was met at the threshold by a portly man with slicked-down silvery hair, a Roman nose, an orderly moustache, and a wall-to-wall smile. He came out of his office with both arms extended in hearty welcome, but his eyes—two dots of icy black—were wary and frightened.

"Come in, come in, Mr. Furz. This is an unexpected pleasure indeed."

I flipped open my wallet, waved my expired Sigma Delta Chi membership card under his impres-

sive nose, then snapped it shut again. "Furz. Department of Justice investigator."

"To be sure, to be sure. Come in, come in," McCorkle rumbled, seeing nothing but my unfriendly eyes.

I preceded him into the office, which was only half an acre smaller than Mr. Armbruster's, and sat stiffly in a luxurious armchair. "I'll come right to the point, McCorkle," I said in a tone approximating that used by my income tax agent. "We are interested in Polykleer. History, chronology of development and marketing, patent searches, agreements—the whole ball of wax. I'm here to make a preliminary examination of the file on this product. I—"

"You're calling for all documents and plan custody?" he broke in anxiously.

"Not at this time. At the moment I propose only to skim the documents and make any notes I feel might apply to my field agent report. Is there a place—a private corner somewhere—where I can sit and do my reading uninterrupted?"

"Of course, of course, of course," he assured me through his grin. "The law library is just the place. It's immediately adjacent to my office here." He waved toward a door in the paneling.

"That should do it," I said gravely. "Now. May I see the file, please?"

"Of course, of course, of course." He went to a bank of drawers set slyly in the woodwork and spun a combination wheel. There was a well-oiled click and he slid open one of the drawers. After fussing a moment, he turned and brought me a fat expansion folio—one of those folders you tie with a string. "Here you are. All nice and compact. You understand, Mr. Furz, that these are only the es-

sence of the matter. All the specific documents and a précis of the historical and developmental data. Any other detail would have to be drawn from a number of other files—most of them in R and D. They are available anytime you might request them. We have nothing to hide around here.”

As I stood up and made for the law library, he said, “Mr. Furz?”

“Well, what is it?”

“Ah— Isn’t this somewhat unusual? I—”

“Unusual? What do you mean, McCorkle?”

“Well, ah, I’ve never seen the Justice Department proceed in just this manner—one man coming in like this and—”

“It’s an acceptable procedure, McCorkle. Not used very often. But acceptable.” I gave him an especially dark stare that accused him of gross stupidity.

“Oh, I’m sure it is. But I—”

“I’ll return the file to you when I’m finished. Now, if you’ll excuse me I’ll get on with my duties.”

“To be sure, to be sure.”

I sat at a long table in the book-lined room, reading in the light of the gathering snowstorm outside. It took the better part of an hour to leaf through all the pages and get a shot of each with my Minox camera. As far as I could see, there was nothing sensational in the whole batch, but the photographs would be good insurance against my having missed something due to my naïveté in matters technical. Then I returned the file to the trembling hands of the bravely ebullient Mr. McCorkle and toddled on back to the men’s room, where I

reverted to my telephone maintenance guise and activated the Jensen tracer.

The Archives, I found, were on the second floor of the layer cake and overlooked the plant. They consisted of many glass partitions and file cabinets and were supervised by a pair of matrons who looked as if their bottoms had been pinched in 1888 and they had never quite gotten over it.

"What are you doing?" the matron with the white hair dyed blue that had come out violet asked as I came through the door, waving the Jensen tracer.

"Telephone man," I said.

"I asked *what* you are doing, young man."

"Tracing a phone line."

"Do you have a work order?" she asked sharply.

"Oy-boy. Doesn't anybody around this company have something to do besides ask to see work orders?" I looked her up and down. "And anyhow, who the heck are you?"

She gasped. "I am the chief *archivist* for the firm, young man. No one enters here without my express approval." She glanced at the matron with the white hair dyed black that had come out olive drab, who pursed her lips and nodded in nineteenth-century confirmation.

I sighed to signify my burgeoning irritation, but I fished out the crumpled work order slip and put it on the chief archivist's desk. She picked it up and stared at it. I was becoming very conscious of the fact that I'd already been on these premises dangerously long.

"This work order says you are supposed to be on the third floor," she said testily.

"So my work takes me to the second floor. So sue me."

"This authorization isn't good here. You'll have to get a new work order slip. And signed by Mr. Cootch—not Gert Miggles." Her tone suggested triumph, as if she had dropped a twospot trump on my ace of spades.

It wasn't easy, but I manufactured a yawn, biting off a huge chunk of air. "O.K.," I said, my voice full of wind, "but I'll be back maybe four, five days. Meantime, if Mr. Armbruster's phone conks out you tell him why."

"You're working on Mr. Armbruster's phone?" she asked warily.

"Mm-hm."

"How long do you expect to be?" The chief archivist, I saw, was maneuvering for a face-saving compromise.

I shrugged. "As long as it takes. If the Armbruster phone conks out it could be a two-week job. His line runs through the ceiling here, and we'd have to take down all the plaster, move several rows of these here file cabinets. That kinda thing."

Alarm came to her watery eyes. "Can't you do something right now? I mean, like fix it, or something?"

"That's what I'm trying to do, lady."

"Well, get at it, young man. Get *at* it."

"Yes, Your Archivery."

I got at it, and, wandering down a corridor formed by two tall ranks of forbidding steel drawers, I reactivated the tracer. Its light throbbed slowly and feebly, showing me I was only lukewarm. At the far end of the corridor I went around to the right and entered the adjacent aisle. The throbbing weakened as I progressed, so I made a

U-turn and moved to the aisle to the left of my original route. The light began to show a little vigor now, and I walked the length of this aisle. Another turn—this to the right—and into another aisle. The light was becoming much brighter, and the throbbing accelerated.

There was a steady, pulsating glow when I arrived at the far end of the third aisle. I punched the locator button and there was a soft buzzing. It became a beep when I held the tracer next to the third drawer from the top of the fourth cabinet from the end.

Ah-ha. Good show, Holmes, old chap.

I was delighted with the cabinet's position in the Royal Archives—diagonally across the large room from the desk where the Two Furies were enthroned and in fair proximity to an electrical conduit that ran down a wall. This latter could give me something to tinker with in the event one of the Furies decided to come down for some kibitzing.

The cabinet was secured by a combination lock, so I dug into my kit for the Bigelow listener. Placing its receivers in my ears like a stethoscope, I affixed the sensor to the steel next to the dial, activated the system, and began to spin the wheel.

Snick, snack, pop. Snick, snack, pop. Snick snack, pop.

Voilà.

The drawer slid open and I worked fast, fingering through the file folders for the cough drop. *Here? No. Here? Easy, boy.*

Ah.

I lifted out the folder, flipped it open, removed the cough drop, and laid the folder and its contents flat across the open drawer. I dropped the drop into the kit and snatched up the Minox.

I heard a chair push back, scraping against the floor.

The archivist was getting curious.

First page.

Damn. I'd forgot to cock the camera.

First page. Click.

Second page. Click.

Footsteps.

Third page. Click.

Footsteps.

Jesus.

Fourth and last page. Click.

I closed the folder and returned it to its place in the drawer; then, whistling my tuneless whistle, I closed the drawer and spun the combination dial. Turning on my heel, I knelt and was tapping the electrical conduit just as Old Violet Top came around the corner, her hands folded primly across her tummy.

"What are you doing there, young man?"

"Trying to find the granular phase degrader."

"Why are you wearing a stethoscope?"

Hoo-boy! Where was my verschlugginer mind?

"Oh, this? This is no stethoscope. It's a cortorizing fleekle determiner. Use it all the time when a flens grisket goes out." I tried to be casual as I removed the instrument from my ears and dropped it into the satchel. "No good here, though. The flens must be upstairs, just like I thought."

"I thought you said you were looking for a phase degrader. Is that the same as a flens?"

Four hundred and eighty jillion women in the world, and I had to find one who yearned to be a mechanic.

"No. But they work on the same circuit. Find one, you find them both." I gave her a narrow-eyed

stare. "Say," I said in a confidential tone, "that's the prettiest hair I've seen in a long time. How you get it that pretty?"

She blushed, immediately and altogether. Patting her fuzz in a burst of self-consciousness, she faltered, "This old stuff? It gives me fits. Fits."

"Well, take it from me, lady, you should be proud of it. Pretty. Real pretty. I ain't seen an effect like that ever. Honest."

I glanced at my watch. "Oh-oh. Tempus certainly does fugit. Here I am, dallying with girls when Mr. Armbruster's phone might go out any second. And it's all your fault." I winked.

She pulled herself together with a little flutter and said, "Well, hurry up, then. Mr. Armbruster—"

"Say, mind if I stick my head in to say hello next time I'm here? I get jobs here pretty often, you know."

"Well, it's a free country, young man."

"Yeah. Well, I got to be running along. Stay pretty, hear?"

I sensed that something was wrong as soon as I returned to the first-floor reception room. Gert was standing rigid and red-faced behind her counter and several men—one of them in a security guard's uniform—were bustling about the lobby, waving their arms and whispering heatedly. In their vortex, short and blue and trembling behind his black-mask spectacles, was Mr. Armbruster. A lump of dry ice formed at the base of my tongue, and I had fast, panicky thoughts—all involving escape. I was committed, however, because the jingling of my costume jewelry had caught the attention of the

millers-about and they all gave me the momentary consideration before returning to their debate.

When defensive, be offensive, as they say in the Pentagon.

I strolled up to Mr. Armbruster and said, "Hello again, Your Chairmanship. What's all the fuss?"

He looked at me out of eyes that registered opaque horror. "We've got a spy on the premises," he gargled.

"A what?"

"A spy."

"No *kidding*."

"He came right in here—right past the receptionist without she even sees him."

"How do you know that, Your Board-Membership?"

His lower lip trembled and I was sure he would begin to weep. His eyes, all out of focus, were staring off into the distance as if contemplating a gallows. "Man calling himself Furz. Pretending to be from the Justice Department. The receptionist never even *saw* him."

"Hey, that's serious, huh?"

"McCorkle got suspicious. Never saw the Justice Department work that way. Checked the guest register Gert keeps and he wasn't even signed in. Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God."

"Man. Just like on TV, ain't it. But how do you know he ain't from the Justice Department?"

"McCorkle called Washington. They never heard of Furz."

"Oo. Well, why you so worried?"

His wild eyes came around to settle roughly on my forehead. "He had a whole hour with a most secret file."

"What's he look like?"

"Great big man. Huge. Nasty face. Blue suit. Pansy tie. Horrible man."

"Say—I think I seen him from a window where I was working on the furiator fuses. I wondered why a guy would run through snowbanks to get to the parking lot."

"You saw him *leave*?"

"Yeah. You got it right, man. He musta been six-foot-six if he was an inch. I wouldn't want to mix it up with *that* cat, man." I consulted my watch. "Well, I hope you find him and everything works out all right. So long, Your Executiveship."

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God."

Driving back to the diner I felt a giddy sense of victory. I'd had very little time to examine the file, what with the camera work and the snoopy old lady and all. But I'd seen all I needed to know.

It had been spelled out in the very damn title of the document.

An absolute confirmation.

CHAPTER 23

Who, what, when, where, why, and how?

The classic journalism formula.

I now knew the what, the when, the where, the how, and the why.

I needed only to nail down the who. All the who's.

And prove it.

CHAPTER 24

At the diner I removed the letters from my telephone truck, stowed all the gear in the Pennsylvania-licensed Corvair, then gobbled a lunch in a kind of frenzied nervous reaction. The counterman displayed surprising mellowness.

"Snowin' like a sonabitch," he observed, rattling things in the rinse tray.

"I'll say."

"Radio says it'll get worse before it gets better."

"Did it say anything about the roads?"

"Snowy, but traffic still movin'."

I took a leisurely sip of coffee and decided to return the truck to the agency after I changed clothes and checked out of the motel. The wall clock told me that if the highways were kept clear at all I should be back in Hootenville in time to revive Billy's stinking predinner log fire.

"I was lookin' out the kitchen window," the counterman said.

"Thrill of a lifetime, I suppose."

"I'm wonderin' why anybody'd bother to dude up a panel truck to read like it came from the telephone company."

"I was at a party. The idea was to come in the silliest vehicle you could think of," I said blandly.

"Telephone truck ain't so silly."

"Guess not. But you should've seen the guy who came in a horse-drawn submarine. It was a real gas."

He did not believe me, of course, but at this euphorious moment I couldn't have cared less. The caper was over, and I had escaped to live and fright another day.

On a whim, I picked up the wall phone at the end of the counter and put in a call to Peg. There was no answer. On another whim, I canceled the call and asked for Andy Morris's home phone. Minah answered on the fourth buzz.

"Hi, Minah. Dex."

"Well, hi, dreamboat. Where are you?"

"New York. I've been trying to raise Peg. Is she with you by any chance?"

"Why, no. I wanted her to come over this afternoon to try a new coffee roll—it has pecans and fruit in a positively fantastic goo over a crunchy Danish kind of base and is better than anything you could ever get at Dolan's Bakery and is only eighty cents at the Food Fair—but she said she had an appointment with some man and wouldn't be back until late and would I take your kids for supper, which I most certainly will do because they're swell kids to have around and are such a

good influence on Gary, who needs all the good influence he can get, God knows.”

I experienced a kind of dread—nameless and oppressive. “Man? What man?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. Probably an antique dealer or something like that there, you know?”

“Didn’t she give you any idea who he is?”

“No. But she was in a hurry, all right. Must be a hot item, huh?”

“Yeah. Well, thanks, Minah. And thanks for taking the kids.”

“Anytime, Dex-baby.”

I hung up, and, steeped in new worry, I paid my bill and then crossed the blustery highway to the Easy Does It Motel. I laid out my blue business suit, stripped off the khakis, and used up seven dollars’ worth of the motel’s hot water in a roaring shower.

When I returned to the bedroom, I almost dropped the towel I’d wrapped around my middle. I had a visitor in my Easy Does It easy chair.

“For God’s sake,” I said, not bothering to hide my surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Fitch grinned, crossed his legs, pushed back his hat, and said, “Hi.”

“Well, hi. But I repeat: How come you’re here?”

“I’m down on business. I was driving down the highway and happened to spot you coming here. You left the door unlocked. If I were the type I could have walked off with that thirty dollars on the dresser.”

I wiped my face with a corner of the towel. “And they say coincidence has no role in suspense stories.”

“Yeah. Hell of a coincidence, eh?” Fitch laughed.

"I'd offer you a drink, but all I have is tap water."

"No matter. I don't want one anyhow." He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and ignited it with his Zippo.

Combing my hair, I looked at him in the mirror and said, "What are you working on down this way?"

His eyes met mine in the glass. "Well, I'm always wandering around on these industrial things. Stockholders' meetings, briefings on new products, personality profiles for the business mags, in-depth digging for the news weeklies—that kind of crap."

"Must keep you jumping. Lucky you're not married."

"Oh, I was married once. But it was a mistake. She was the daughter of a Main Line phony who didn't have a dime but liked to pretend he had a billion. He brought her up a snob, and after the honeymoon was over and her libido had been sated, she looked around and saw our crappy little cold-water flat and left me for a skin-diving playboy."

"Good riddance, eh?" I said, closing my suitcase.

"I suppose. But the hell of it was, I was goofy over her. So I swore that if I ever did anything in my life I was going to pile up enough money to buy her back."

I gave him a stare that must have oozed incredulosity. "You've got to be joking."

"No, I'm sorry to say, I'm not. If it takes money to get her back, then I'll get her back." His narrow face was smiling but his eyes were not. I didn't know what his eyes were doing, but whatever it was, it made them ugly.

"Well," I said, embarrassed by this bizarre reve-

lation and the thing it had caused to flicker across his face, "if money's your objective, you've picked a lousy way to make it. You don't get rich chasing news, old buddy. I know. I've tried it."

"Oh, I do pretty well, as a matter of fact," he said.

"Yeah. What do you say we knock off and take a ride on your yacht?"

"I make a lot of money. And you could've, too."

I paused in the brushing of my suit coat and peered at him. "What in hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Formula F."

I felt a new kind of chill and I sat on the edge of the bed, staring into those oddly filmed eyes. "Formula F?"

"Mm-hm. That superduper secret plastic you're making at Hooten."

"As you say, Fitch, that's a secret."

He stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray stenciled "Have a Good Time." "Come on, Dex," he said quietly, "I know why you threw a block at Lacey."

"Lacey?"

"You knocked out Lacey to remove the middleman and thereby place yourself for a larger piece of the action."

I felt my jaw going up and down. "I—"

"Understand," Fitch said, waving a hand, "I haven't any quarrel with your competitive urge. Furthermore, Lacey has been, as the idiom goes, somewhat of a drag. A fussbudget. And I've been much impressed with your style. You're imaginative, cunning, persevering. Great traits for this kind of work."

"What kind of work, Fitch?" I managed.

"The acquisition and sale of industrial secrets."

"You mean you pose as a newsman but you really slink around unsuspecting companies and steal their secrets and then peddle the secrets to competitors?" I swallowed what seemed to be a roll of flypaper.

"Something like that. Only I don't do much slinking. I have others to do that for me. Others like the late Claude Lacey."

I sniffed to feign nonchalance. "Lacey wouldn't have known an industrial secret if it ran up his pants leg."

"Don't underestimate old Claude. Running a hardware store like The Swollen Thumb offers quite a few benefits. Lets you pick out patsies. Lets you gather info from said patsies. Lets you bring said info from said patsies to grumpy old money-grubbers like me. And if I like what you bring, I pay you lots of money." He lit another cigarette, glancing at his watch in the process.

"Like how big a lots of money?" I said.

"Like a quarter of a million dollars."

"You can't possibly be serious."

Fitch chuckled through his narrow nose. "Let me put it this way: The risk is very high in industrial development and expansion, and there are a lot of outfits that will do a lot to minimize the hazards. Take simple dyes, for instance. To perfect its production of dyestuffs—starting almost from scratch—one very reputable company invested forty-three million clams, and eighteen years went by before earnings were enough to offset accumulated operating losses. These days, with everybody crowding into the industrial act, some of the shadier companies are very willing to pay for shortcuts. If a shady outfit faces a possible ten million investment

over five years before it can make widgets at a profit, it's not going to blink at paying one million to somebody who, with certain trade secrets and cute bypasses around certain patents, shows them how to make widgets in two years with an investment of four million. See what I mean?"

I nodded. "Sure. And so Lacey was planning to bring you Formula F so that you and he could slice up a million or so paid you by one of these shadier companies. Right?"

"Mm. A split of seventy-five for me, twenty-five for him."

"And now you want me to fill in for the late Lacey? To pick up his quarter of a million?"

"That was your idea, too, wasn't it?"

"Lacey went into the drink the other night."

"That's what I read in the papers, sure enough."

"And you think I put him there?"

Fitch chuckled and reached over a shoulder to change the angle of the Venetian blinds. It had just dawned on me that this was a signal when the door opened.

It was Carl—car-parker and harlot-shooter extraordinary—and Fred, the redheaded Caddie driver. And beside them, pointing a finger of outrage, Claude Lacey.

"Kill him now, Fitch," Lacey snarled. "Kill him *now*."

Fitch held up a restraining hand. "Calm down, Lacey. There's plenty of time."

I honestly couldn't say another word. I could only stare at Fitch, who folded his hands and studied me with distant amusement. He said, "You see, Dex, my being here isn't a coincidence after all."

Carl crossed the room to sit on one of those

straight-backed chairs specially designed to assure discomfort. He opened his coat to grant me a peek at the butt of the .45 in his shoulder holster. Giving me a mean look, he said, "Think you're smart, don't you, smart guy."

My vocal cords became sufficiently mobile to permit my saying, "Carl-baby, there's nobody as stupid as I am."

Fitch laughed. "You made your big mistake," he said, "when you kidnapped Lacey and turned him over to the safekeeping of hoods belonging to that ironhead, Harlan Stokes. One of Lacey's guards was due to leave on a vacation last night, and since it's one of Stokes's silly principles to see that his men get their fringe benefits, he let the man go and hired a piecework hood to fill in. Who did he hire? Carl, of all people. Isn't that a belly buster?"

"Hilarious."

"So Carl here arrives on the job and takes one look at who he's supposed to baby-sit. So he puts the other baby-sitter right to sleep and he and Lacey come running to me to tell me about what a naughty boy you've been. I'll admit I was a bit upset, not knowing where you had gone or what you were doing. Until this morning, when I got a call from a little receptionist in Baltimore who likes to pick up extra money by keeping me informed on who visits her company's brass. Remember LSD's cocktail party? You asked me about Hamilton McCorkle and the other Armbruster lawyers. I wondered why. An odd interest for a house organ editor. So I sent a picture of you to my little receptionist friend and told her to call me if and when you ever showed up. And what do you know? You showed up bright and early this morning."

I nodded wearily. "And so you got Hot Rod Fred here to whizz you down here to see what I was up to. Right?"

"Wrong. We came down here to pick you up and, as they say in the old Bogart movies, rub you out."

"It would be silly to kill me, you know."

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you."

"As you say, if anybody can get the lowdown on Formula F, I can. Why get sore just because I tried to make a bigger buck by cutting out Lacey?"

Fitch shook his head slowly. "Not good enough, Dex. I simply could never trust you. I'd like to, believe me. But I simply couldn't. You're too tricky. And another thing: I must show loyalty to Lacey—to all my people. No, it's the Big Casino for you, I'm afraid. I'll have to get Formula F without your help."

I grasped at another thought. "You'll never be able to peddle Formula F, you know. It's too hot. No responsible manufacturer would touch it. And the irresponsible manufacturers are too small to make it and still get any market lead time."

Fitch laughed again. I didn't like his laugh. But then I didn't like much of anything at this point.

Carl laughed, too.

So did Lacey, who amended his laughter with a comment: "Manufacturers. Get him."

Fitch stopped laughing and stood up, showing displeasure. "All right," he said, "let's get the show rolling." He glanced at Carl. "Did you get the stuff out of Dexter's Corvair?"

"Yeah, boss. Everything. Including the camera and film. The car's clean. So's the truck."

"Good. We'll leave the rental vehicles where they

are. It will add further mystery to Dexter's disappearance when the rental people finally find them." To me he said, "Put your wallet, your car keys, your change—everything—on the bed. You'll not be trying an escape, but any inclinations you might have along those lines will be cooled by the fact that you're penniless and without papers."

I did as I was told.

"Now," Fitch said, checking his watch. "Next stop The Birches."

CHAPTER 25

They stuffed me into the back seat of the Dodge between Fitch and Lacey, who held a little Beretta automatic against my side and looked pleased with himself. Fred drove and Carl rode beside him in the front seat.

We took the Baltimore Beltway to the Harbor Tunnel, but found I-95 closed due to a tank truck accident near the White Marsh exit. So we inched along the long way, bumper to bumper and hour to hour, and I sat there and watched the telephone poles and billboards and diners and trailer camps and drive-ins and gas stations and all the other breathtaking sights that glorify U.S. 40.

The snow was very heavy now—fine-grained and gritty—and the wind, groaning like an oboe, sent it against the twilight traffic in racing, horizontal bursts.

“What happens at The Birches, Fitch?”

He glanced at me, and in the passing headlights I could see his dim smile. "You die, that's what happens at The Birches."

"You use The Birches as a headquarters, then?"

"Of course. Can you think of any other place so safe from the curious eyes of decent citizens?"

"No. I guess not. So how do I die?"

"Since we no longer have need of your fingerprints, Carl is once again carrying the forty-five with which those motel people were, ah, dispatched. He will also use it on you. Nice touch, eh?"

I thought about that. Not very hard, though. "Bodies are hard to dispose of, you know."

"Not for us, Dex. We have a system."

"Like what system?"

"The cook dices you up a bit, then we insert you in an abandoned septic tank."

"Oh."

Lacey stirred and said, "Are you going to make a call about this Dexter development?"

"No," Fitch said thoughtfully. "It might only stir things up unnecessarily. We'll deal with Dexter first, then call."

Nobody said anything after that and I tried unsuccessfully to imagine what all this last conversation was about. By now it was as if I sat in a wobbling gelatin of numbness. My eyes burned and refused to stay open.

My mind went inevitably to Peg and the children, as if it sought independently to intensify my punishment. Despite the drip torture of chunking snow tires and motor hum, I retained a corner of lucidness which, functioning as a tiny lantern slide, projected a portrait of my family—solemn-faced and worn, like "American Gothic" updated. I was

not conscious of terror; on the contrary, my predicament seemed to be retributive justice altogether appropriate to the offense. I had, like a junkie, indulged my weakness with a kind of demented indifference, and I must therefore expect to settle the bill with life and limb. But also like the addict, I had in my last moments a bitter understanding of the price that would be exacted from my loved ones in the years to come. It hurt very much to see them in the reflected light of my inadequacies.

To erase the picture, I named the things that eddied past in the icy nightfall. (That is a Tydol station there; over there is a barn; ahead is a traffic light; we pass a truck; that car is a Buick; there is a VW; this is Wilmington; we follow Market Street over the Brandywine to Concord Avenue, where we turn north between the big church and the all-night diner and head for West Chester on 202. The snow still falls. I am tired. I am not of the Pepsi Generation.)

Somewhere in all this I heard a voice.

"Go right through town, Fred. The back road might not have been plowed."

"All right. Takes longer, though."

"Not if you take Piedmont and cut east on Frisbee."

"O.K."

"I'll see that you get a bonus for today, Fred. You've done a great job of driving."

"There ain't no better driver than me, Mr. Fitch."

"As I say: There'll be a bonus."

"Say, look at Frisbee Street," Carl said. "Hardly a car moving on it. Like one of them ghost towns."

"Good," Fitch said. "It'll help us make time."

Frisbee Street.

It meant something.

Or did it?

What?

Somebody had mentioned Frisbee Street a long time ago.

Who? What?

(To hell with it. To hell with Frisbee Street. I'm cold and sleepy.)

"You're going pretty fast, Fred."

"You said to make time."

"Yes, but these blind side streets—"

"Hell, there ain't nothin' out tonight."

Off to the left I heard a train whistle blare—a complaining groan in the snow-muted night—and the dregs in my brainpan managed a flickering replay of an old scene. Odd, indeed, how every cliché is a cliché because it's so true; in this turgid rerun, I saw again the aptness of the very old one about history repeating itself. In Munich, a thousand years ago, it had been Von Streicher, not Lacey, who had held the pistol against my side. It had been a Walther, not a Beretta; it had been a train compartment, not the back seat of a car; it had been rain, not snow; it had been NATO strategy, not Formula F; it had been millions of lives, not a million dollars. But at the core it had been the same. I had been an obstacle, and Von Streicher had decreed my destruction. And the train whistle had blown, and I, with nothing to lose and with loved ones and hope and civilization-as-I-knew-it receding in the night with every clack of the rails, I had made my move to die at once.

I now felt a surf of melancholy wash over me—a foam of insight that revealed Paul Dexter as a soul destined for an after-life of stormy nights and pistols and silent cries and bitter decision.

The train whistle moaned again.

And I made my move.

I leaned forward, reached over Fred's shoulder, and yanked hard on the steering wheel.

I waited for Lacey's gun to explode against my ribs.

But Lacey was not the man Von Streicher had been. Lacey dropped his gun and placed his elegant hands before his tidy profile and screamed like a woman. Von Streicher had cursed and fought maniacally before I'd taken his slug and dragged him—blindly and without thought or hope—through the compartment door into the eruption of rain and rails and thundering.

But Lacey shrieked like a woman.

And I was very alive and aware.

The Dodge plunged into a slithering sidewise rush. Then, in one of those unpredictable collusions of tire and snow, the wheels caught and sent us—still under power—through the plate-glass show window of the A & P supermarket at the corner of Eighth and Frisbee.

As I rolled down a mountain of Del Monte canned peas, I discovered with a vague kind of interest that Lacey's tiny Beretta was in my hand. I coasted to a stop and ventured a frightened glance at the Dodge, which was half on its side against the remains of a Giant Clearance Sale of Mouth-Puckering Taste Treats. Carl sagged against the car cushions, his eyes showing their whites.

Fred had driven his last car. His legs, curiously bent, were entangled in the steering wheel. His shoulders were on the crumpled hood, where the windshield had once been anchored. I did not see where his head had gone.

I did see Fitch, though. He was coming at me over a ridge of Post Toasties, his bleeding mouth working, his eyes wild, his breath sucking. He was leveling an automatic pistol at the knot in my tie.

The Beretta made a polite little *snick* each time I pulled the trigger. And Fitch made a polite little bow before he sat down in some Grape Nuts and died.

Lacey appeared from somewhere, squealing and bloody and clawing for Fitch's gun. So, with my last cartridge, I shot him, too.

Carl rolled from the car, cursing. I threw the empty pistol at him.

And then I was on Eighth Street and running.

Plowed streets do not leave tracks. Or at least they show fewer tracks. Is there a plowed street in the house? To be sure. There's one right here. It is a beautiful street called Eighth. Use it.

Behind, the sound of other running.

My own running, too.

Frisbee Street.

Fitch had mentioned Frisbee Street.

But so had Bill Liggett, whose management had made an offer to screw company stockholders. Dry, arid Bill.

A place to hide?

Of course. The best place to hide is in a crowd. Any old crowd.

On Frisbee Street there was a crowd.

My head began to clear.

I staggered around the corner at Glover Street and saw that it, too, had been plowed. Thankful for this tiny blessing, I made my way to the alley that ran beside Slater's Department Store and connected Glover with Frisbee. The running sounds behind grew fainter and less assured.

At alley's end I saw the cellar door and the feeble light above it.

Sanctuary, of sorts.

Beside the door was the discreet little sign: "Alcoholics Anonymous. Welcome."

Tonight's blizzard seemed to have served as a challenge for Hootenville's AA faithful. The room, a low-ceilinged expanse of concrete and heating pipes with a raised platform and lectern at the far end, appeared to be the gathering place for every adult man and woman between Harrisburg and Trenton. It was crammed, and the only empties in the mass of folding chairs were in the last row directly to my right.

I did the best I could and eased my way to a chair in the far rear corner next to a groaning coatrack. A few eyes considered me momentarily—at once reflecting pity for me and my tattered, frozen, blood-spotted clothes—then returned to the man who stood at the lectern and spoke earnestly into a mike.

I sat down, aching in every corpuscle, and tried to become invisible.

"—and, ladies and gentlemen, it's the newcomer to AA who is the crux, the nucleus, the touchstone of the AA program. It's the newcomer who does more than seek to save his own drowning life. It's the newcomer who reminds us who've found sobriety just how much we've won, how far we've come, and how much we stand to lose if we return to the jug. And what do we old-timers offer the newcomer? We—"

The man went on, his voice even and deep and sincere, and the words blurred and I nodded. I must have dozed for a long time.

Then I stopped dozing.

I wanted to climb the heating pipes.

Someone sat down beside me, pressed a gun into my left kidney, and whispered in Carl's voice, "Don't budge an earlobe, buddy-boy. Just sit and listen to the nice man until I get my breath. Then we'll both stand up and leave like real gents."

I sat. But I couldn't listen. There was too much roaring in my head.

So we sat there, with my head roaring and Carl's breath soughing, and felt the steamy warmth and heard the man droning. The pipes overhead hissed and thumped, and there was the polite attention and silence of the crowd around. Inches away sat three big men with broad backs under their crisp go-to-meeting suits—inches that might as well have been light years. To reach out and tap one of those shoulders and to ask for help was to ask the man to die with me, a totally unreasonable request. So I sat and studied their backs, resenting their obliviousness and their calm expectancy of life tomorrow, their smug sureness that all's well that mends well.

Again history indulged its propensity for repetition.

In the silent crowd and the droning, I thought of Charlie Niemeyer.

Perhaps it was the piousness in the room. Perhaps it was my own lowering sense of a life wasted, of years of nothing done, of hopes unachieved.

But I thought of Charlie. And I sought for the analogous.

I found it.

Then, because I had no cork, I stuck a finger in my mouth, with the tip against the wall of a cheek. And listened to the man.

"—and, my good friends, what is it that the

shaking, miserable drunk wants most to hear when he attends his first AA meeting? What is it that he wants to hear more than anything else in the world?"

Foomp.

CHAPTER 26

One crystal Sunday morning in May, right after V-E Day, Charlie Niemeyer and I had attended services at a Lutheran church in Bad Schwalbach, the site of the Military Intelligence Service Replacement Center. Charlie was a scrubbed, right-minded American Protestant, and on this particular morning he had suggested that I attend church with him. Filled with remorse over a casual dabbling with a compliant Fraulein the night before, I agreed, seeking to build up a bit of goodwill with what must surely be a highly displeased God. The German congregation had favored us by pretending not to see our U.S. uniforms, and we sat in the back, stiff and proper and exuding good manners and attentiveness. At one point in the service, though, there was a protracted silence in which the Burgers communed on their private wires with their private Deities. In the depths of this, Charlie

of all the most unlikely individuals—emitted an involuntary, reverberating, and mellifluous burp. Every steely Hessian eye in the place converged on him instantaneously, and, although the war was officially over, there was not a *Mann*, *Frau*, or *Kind* under that Gothic roof who was not ready to nail himself another smart-aleck Yankee soldier.

Now, at this moment and in this electric silence in this cellar meeting hall, I felt what Charlie must have felt.

Every steely AA eye in the place converged on me, incensed at the very notion of a cork popping on this hallowed ground.

I pointed at Carl and said, "This man is DRINK-ING."

And then the situation deteriorated rapidly.

A woman close by squealed and said, "That drinker—he has a *gun*!"

A man close by dived for the floor and said, "Down, everybody! The drinker has a *gun*!"

In the ensuing jot of time, the room became a sea of clattering chairs and heaving rumps. I had an insanely wobbling vision of the man at the lectern doing a swan dive into the throng and of the three broad-backed men rolling to one side—shouting soundlessly above the roar.

I took a swing at Carl, who stood as a tower of confusion, but it was like hitting the prow of the U.S.S. *Forrestal*. He was kind enough to blink, but that's all. However, a pile of people, all shoes and flailing legs, came tumbling over the underbrush of chairs, and their sheer weight and mass slammed him against the coatrack, which, in turn, engulfed him in a welter of hangers and overcoats. He went down, then staggered erect.

I ran.

Out the door and onto Frisbee Street and down the trolley tracks on the corner of Railroad Avenue. Left on Railroad, my legs churning and my breath screeching and my arms pumping.

Sirens whining in the distance.

The sounds of running behind me.

The wind and snow choking me, stinging my eyes, turning my face into a slab.

Closer behind me the spattering of running feet and the rasp of panting and Carl's "son of a bitch, son of a bitch, son of a bitch."

The wind, loud and shrilling.

It must have been some perverted homing instinct at work, because at no time was I conscious of my destination. But as a cat bolts for a tree at the sound of a running dog, as a mouse dives for a hole at the swing of a broom—unthinking yet unerring—I fled to Hefflefinger's Bar and Grill.

I entered the front door at about Mach 8.

"Bruce!" I yelled at the blur of sleeve garters and paunch behind the bar. "Where is *Bruce*, for God's sake?"

I was at the entrance to the rear hallway before I heard the wheezy bartender's reply: "He ain't here."

I was swinging up the back stairs. "Cleo, then—where in hell is Cleo?"

I was on the second landing when I heard: "She's giving Bruce a piano lesson."

I was making for the next landing when I heard—far below—the front door crash open, a series of confused shouts and female yippings, and then the clatter of shoes on the stairs and the puffing son of a bitches.

The stairway broke off at the third floor, re-

suming its upward thrust at the far end of the murky hallway. As I hurtled along the length of this tunnel of despair, the girly-service door opened and a man stepped into my path, saying, "What the hell—"

Even as I threw out my fist I recognized the absurdity of my decking an innocent white slaver who wondered what the hell. But I hit him hard, nonetheless.

I stumbled over his lumpish body and went to my knees, losing about a yard of skin from the palms of my hands as they slid on the dirty boards. Staggering upright, I had the irrational thought that I was swimming in coffee, and a blurred glance over my shoulder revealed the interior of the girly-service office and a coffeepot on a hot plate and a man pushing a woman aside, clutching at a shoulder holster and shouting angrily.

I ran some more.

Up some more stairs.

The door to the roof was locked, but I went through it as if it had been made of Kleenex. Don't ask me why I had run to the roof. I had long ago learned an important lesson: When you must run, be sure you have room in which to run. And even the most callow and unsophisticated graduate of the CIC school in Chicago would have known that a flat, snow-covered, wind-tortured roof four stories above a miserable, soot-stained street is no place to run.

I floundered through the cold to the ledge behind the chimney on the far rim of the roof.

There was another shout on the stairs below, and then the boom of a .45—loud and echoing. A man yelled in pain, and a woman screamed.

The end of a perfect evening for the girly-service tenants.

Huddling behind the bricks, my heart exploding, my breath coming in stabs of pain, my legs and arms hanging like cold-storage bologna, my eyes filmed with tears and fright, I waited for Carl.

It wasn't a very long wait.

He came out the door, a mass of shadow moving against the deeper shadow. Pausing, he turned his huge head, and I could sense the bulging eyes peering through the dark, probing from side to side.

There was nothing behind me but four stories of empty air and the sounds of loud talking and excitement at the entrance to the bar far below.

Carl's weight crunched on the snow and I heard him say, "Well, you son of a bitch, you got to be behind the chimney."

"Carl," I said through suedelike lips, "you'd better quit while you've got a chance. You knock me off and there are a hundred witnesses down there who'll put the finger on you."

"Oh, you're making speeches again, huh? You're the gabbiest son of a bitch I ever did see."

"Tell you what, Carl: You let me go and I'll give you ten grand to make for Rio. I'll even buy your ticket."

"Smart guy."

"I mean it. You knock me off and you get the maximum rap. You let me go and you're a well-to-do expatriate in sunny South America. Why make it tough for yourself?"

"Forget it, buster. There ain't no out for me. They'd find me."

"The cops? Don't be ridiculous."

"I ain't talking about cops. I'm talking about them."

"What them?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Dexter, you make me want to throw up. All the time talking." He raised his arm and I saw the gleam of reflected street light on a well-oiled barrel.

"Sweet dreams, pal."

Have you ever sat alone in a quiet room, reading, perhaps, late at night, and sense that something just beyond the corner of your eye had moved? You turn your head, a kind of thrill in your belly, only to find nothing there. Now, behind the pistol barrel and to one side, in the dark and just beyond my vision, I felt or sensed or imagined or dreamed that something had moved. When I turned my head, I saw that, sure enough, something had.

It had an arm cocked, and in the hand was a purse.

The something said, "You leave my husband alone, you dirty son of a bitch of a bug-eyed bastard!"

The purse came around in a whistling arc to chunk against the side of Carl's Neanderthal head. He turned slowly, as if to study the source of this vexing interruption. But in turning he moved his feet, and his shoes made an odd hissing noise as they slid in the snow and threw his body into a 45-degree angle. He reached out for support, but the only support available was four stories of empty air, and this proved to be insufficient for his purposes. He went over the side, revolving slowly in the night.

About halfway down he said, "Son of a bitch."

He sounded puzzled.

There was a moment of absolute silence, and

then a burst of shrieks from the Hefflefinger habitués below.

"Dex."

"Peg."

"Dex."

"Peg."

She laughed, a giddy, high-pitched, nerve-bursting laugh.

"We sound like that silly goddam John-and-Marcia record," she said.

"Peg, you're beautiful when you cuss."

CHAPTER 27

From the *Hootenville Clarion* of Saturday, Feb. 26:

4 SLAIN, MEETING TERRORIZED IN MIDTOWN CRASH, SHOOTING

**Newsman, missing merchant, driver
shot by suspected motel killer who
falls to death while fleeing scene**

Four men—including a star newsman and a prominent Hootenville merchant who was thought to have died in an earlier auto mishap—were killed last night in a flurry of gunshots that erupted after a spectacular midtown car crash.

The dead were Alexander T. Fitch, wide-

ly known magazine and newspaper writer; Claude Lacey, owner of The Swollen Thumb hardware store, who had been listed as missing and presumed dead after his car was retrieved from Pine Needle Lake Tuesday night; Fred L. Zansky, unemployed auto mechanic; and Carl M. Koster, doorman at The White Birches men's club.

Gunshots rang out after the car in which the four men were riding whirled out of control on blizzard-swept pavement and plowed through the display window of the A&P supermarket at 8th and Frisbee Streets. Police say Fitch, Lacey, and Zansky were shot to death by Koster. Presumably maddened by his car-crash injuries, the gun-wielding Koster terrorized a meeting of a nearby social club and then fled to the roof of a Railroad Avenue bar, from which he slipped and fell to his death.

Police say ballistics tests of a gun clutched in Koster's hand have identified the weapon as that which not only slew last night's victims but also Matilda D'Arcy, a convicted prostitute, and motel manager Chauncey Gaber, whose bodies were found last Sunday in the Happy Hour Motel on Route 103.

Police admit they are at a loss to explain why the two prominent citizens were riding in the car with Zansky and Koster, or how Lacey's earlier disappearance might have been linked with the shootings. However, Det. Lt. Harry D. Burnside says, "Zansky has been known to serve as Lacey's chauffeur now and then, and Koster has long been suspected of petty hoodlumism. It's my guess that Koster was trying to put the bite on Fitch and Lacey and became enraged when they refused to cooperate. There was a

struggle in the car and the accident and shootings followed."

The bizarre chain of events, police say, began—

CHAPTER 28

Almost as if the isobars enjoyed a spot of symbolism, too, the weather had passed on, leaving the skies over Hootenville broad and blue and crisp with a hint of spring. It was a positively gorgeous Monday morning, all in all, and despite my aches and pains and the unbending patches of adhesive tape here and there, I decided it was my very favorite February 28.

I had collapsed during the hugging and kissing on Hefflefinger's roof garden and I remembered very little of subsequent events except Peg's bossing around of some blue uniforms and white coats and a dream sequence in which I rode bareback on an enormous siren that dumped me finally in a tile room under some brilliant lights. There had been some poking around and a muffled agreement that here was a case of nervous exhaustion and shock if there ever was one, and then I must have slept. By

Sunday evening I was able to persuade the hospital I was worthy of parole to work-week society.

"I still say you're pushing things," Peg said, turning the station wagon up Central Avenue. "You've been in a car wreck, you know."

"Duty calls."

"I never saw anybody as quick to snarl himself up in somebody else's business as you are. You ought to have a good swift kick in the behind."

I nodded, admiring the day anew. "I'll say. But look who's talking."

"What does that mean?"

"It seems to me you were being something of a busybody yourself Friday night, pushing bad guys off roofs and things."

She shuddered visibly. "That *horrid* man." After a pause she said, "But I didn't push him off the roof."

"I know."

"I would have, though."

"I know."

"He was going to kill you."

"Yeah."

She made a right turn from the left lane and we began the ascent of Greer Street. I asked the obvious question: "What were you doing on that roof, Peg?"

"I was in that office on the third floor when that man chased you up to the roof."

"Why were you in that office? And who were you with?"

"I can't say."

"Why?" I asked this as a matter of form.

"I can't talk about this with you. I promised I wouldn't." She sounded as if she might throw a dish if she'd had one around.

"Well," I said, being especially gentle, "that's one of the things I like about you. You're a lot of things, but you aren't a promise-breaker."

She said, "They made me promise. They said—Oh, dammit. I—" She faltered, her voice thick and angry.

I reached over and squeezed her knee. "I think I know why you were there."

She looked at me, letting the car drift against the curb here and there. "You do?"

"Watch your driving, will you? I just had the wheels aligned two weeks ago."

"You're sure it's over?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking. It depends a good bit on what's waiting for me at the office."

"Oh, God, I *hope* it's over."

"One thing sure," I said. "I know why you called Andy Morris at his office the other day."

She looked at me again, and in the process managed to remain in the vicinity of the road. "You know about that?"

"I overheard Andy telling Dom about your call."

"Why did I call him?" she asked warily.

"You were worried about me. And you called him for advice. And he told you not to worry—I was in good hands. Things like that."

"He did?"

"Mm. And this only worried you more. And so you took to following me—the first time when Fitch and I went down to the missile center."

"I was not about to have you running around the country side, getting in trouble like that time in Munich." Her tone was defiantly female. Or femalely defiant. "But they made me stop following

you. They said it could get both of us killed. And then what would happen to the kids."

I gave her a sidewise glance. "You're a darb, you are. Damnedest woman I ever married."

"The luckiest thing you ever did was marry me."

"I'll say."

We rode up the drive to the Admin Building, which stood austere and snowcapped in the sun.

"What's for supper?"

"Search me, buddy," she said. "I'm no fortune-teller. I'm a husband worry-abouter, by trade. I got out of practice there for a while. But I'm working at it full time now."

Miss MacIntosh was looking very peculiar this morning, and a careful examination established the reason. She was smiling at me. Nothing especially heartwarming, to be sure, since the smile was filled with gloating.

"Good morning," I said. "Call Balsley Hooten and tell him there's a holler out for him."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Dexter." She turned to her switchboard and jazzed the machinery with an elaborate mockery that left little doubt that the ladies' room telegraph had at last passed word of my dismissal.

I went straight to my office.

Maudie looked up from the stack of junk mail she was opening and gave me a wide-eyed inspection. "Boss!" she burbled in her girlish contralto. "What in the world happened to you?"

"This?" I said, waving at my Band-Aids. "I fell down the cellar stairs."

She showed great sympathy and concern. "I tried to call you all day Friday when you didn't come to work. Nobody answered the phone—even Saturday and Sunday."

"Sorry about that," I parried, feigning bossly preoccupation. "Any calls this morning?"

"Only a few hundred thousand. All of them starting with Mr. Hooten wanting to know if and when you'd be in."

"What did you tell him?" I asked, leafing through the wad of "While You Were Out" slips.

"I promised him I'd put his name on the list."

"O.K. Now rattle up some coffee, hear?"

She charged out in a swirl of scent and skirt, relieved that her world was returning to normal. But I was filled with my own liberal dose of relief. All but one of the phone slips recorded in-company or local calls—obviously routine. The exception, though, gave me a thrill in whatever gland it is that lets one thrill. He had called at eight-thirty this morning and would call again at ten, the note said.

Fine. Just fine.

So it had worked after all.

Balsley Hooten was the first arrival, true to expectation and general appropriateness. My natural inclination was to arise, but I stifled this reflex and remained affixed to my chair, manufacturing a passably neutral nod meant to show the controlled indignation of a very nice fellow who had been sorely put upon.

"You need a bigger office, Dexter," he said, looking around. His tone implied that my humble digs were directly due to my having voted against Coolidge.

"I'll say."

"LSD is being transferred to London," he said abruptly. "He will be in charge of our London office."

"Oh? I didn't know you had a London office."

"We don't. But it'll be some time, I dare say, before LSD realizes that."

I sniffed. "I'm sure of it. He's a bladder-head."

"God, don't I know it."

"Why do you keep him on?"

"My wife is why I keep him on. The most carefully guarded of our company secrets is the fact that LSD is my brother-in-law."

"God have mercy on you."

"Amen."

There was a pause, during which he frowned at me. "I want you to be my community-relations manager."

"Oh? What about your, ah, various images? People are beginning to find out about my little visit to The Birches, you know."

"I am going to pretend I am the only person in town who does not know about your visit. The silent titters of gossips are part of the price I will pay to have you as my community-relations manager."

"What's the other part of the price?"

"Twenty thousand a year to start. Plus bonus and options."

"How about the vast sums of my own money I've spent on company business in the past week or so?"

"Total reimbursement."

"I see."

His yellow eyes went up and down my frame. "Do you accept?"

"I'll think about it."

"Well, my God, man—aren't you surprised?"

"Not really."

"Well, why? You—"

"Call in the others, Mr. Hooten, and I'll tell you why."

"What others?"

"The men you have waiting out in the hall."

The eyes narrowed, and for a moment I thought I saw laughter in them. But this, of course, was nonsense. The last time Balls Hooten had laughed was when his mommy kitchy-cooed him in his bathinette.

"MORRIS!" he hollered, his gaze still fastened to mine.

A black-eyed Andy came in, followed by a bemused Dr. George Kopeck and a grinning Dom. The only surprise was the man at the end of the column: the public library drunk, alias Brewster. Well, not a surprise, exactly. I had expected to have words with him sooner or later, but not right away like this.

I was not at all surprised to see that his right arm was in a sling.

All assembled, we looked like six bananas in a water glass. I extricated myself from the chair and, pointing to it with my chin, said, "Sit down, Mr. Hooten. I'll stand on the windowsill."

He corkscrewed his way into the chair and regarded me with what could have been gratitude. I considered the others and said, "Welcome to Convention Hall."

"Hi," Andy said, smiling faintly and touching a finger to his magenta eye.

"Hi," Dom said brightly.

"Dexter," Kopeck said, inclining his head in the manner of royalty.

The public library drunk said nothing. Which raised him in my estimation. To him I said, "I don't believe we've met. Officially, that is."

Andy negotiated a wave. "Oh, sorry. This is Hank Brewster, of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Paul Dexter, Hank."

Brewster and I shook left hands above everybody's heads.

"Dexter wants to tell us a few things," Balsley Hooten said. He canvassed the others with his eyebrows. "Well?"

"Sure, why not?" Andy said, his smile becoming more apparent.

"O.K. with me," Brewster said.

I made myself comfortable on the windowsill by propping my feet on the desk between Balsley Hooten and the pastepot. "I should begin, I suppose, with Armbruster's acquisition of Yenom and the man who sneaked it to them. But—"

Hooten made that V with his brows and said, "Hold on: You mean you *know* who turned over Yenom to Armbruster?"

"Yep."

"Who?"

"You, Mr. Hooten."

"I?"

"You."

"Well—"

I held up a hand. "Wait. Let me take it chronologically." I paused for dramatic effect. All eyes were upon me. Well, almost all. Two of them—those belonging to Brewster—were studying the floor with what appeared to be pensive amusement.

"One day, probably last fall," I said, "Mr. Brewster and/or others from the FBI must have come to Mr. Hooten with a fascinating story. It must have gone something like this: Claude Lacey, operator of The Swollen Thumb, was suspected of peddling industrial secrets interstate—a Federal

offense. They would like, the FBI said, to test Lacey, not only to get the goods on him but also to determine who his boss was. The FBI told Mr. Hooten that a number of corporate chiefs in the Pennsylvania-Delaware-Maryland area were being asked to cooperate in the plan."

"Cooperate?" Brewster purred. "What means cooperate?"

"You and your FBI buddies," I purred back, "wanted to float the confidential manufacturing process for some product whose exposure would not seriously damage its owner but whose characteristics would seem to be of sufficient interest to bait Lacey. Then, by keeping Lacey under close surveillance, the FBI hoped to see how, first, he went about peddling his stolen data, and, second, who his boss was, if indeed he had one. To close the circle around Lacey, presidents of key companies—themselves anxious to counter this potential threat to corporate serenity—agreed to notify the FBI if Lacey or anyone else contacted them as prospective buyers of the stolen process. After Mr. Hooten agreed to sacrifice Yenom for this purpose, the FBI looked for the medium by which Yenom could be floated. The G-men eventually enlisted Dom, who, thanks to his easy access to Hooten's buildings and his swinging private life, would carry high credibility as a man ready, willing, and able to steal a blueprint now and then to help subsidize his wenching. So good old Dom, shopping at The Thumb one day, let Lacey know he was on the take. Lacey finally confided to Dom that he'd pay well for any data Dom might be able to sneak out of the local industries he serviced as a commercial artist. Dom, coached by the Brewster-Morris-Kopeck combine, took the data on Yenom to Lacey.

Lacey, in turn, offered the data to Armbruster, which, in turn, called the FBI as arranged. The FBI told Armbruster to accept Lacey's offer. And—"

"Well, how about you?" Brewster broke in. "If Dom was set up as a double agent, why were you rung in?"

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was nearing 10 o'clock. I felt the Munich-type excitement again.

"I was rung in," I said, "when Lacey told Dom his next assignment was Formula F. Oh-oh, the FBI said, that's a real military top secret, and Dom ain't the logical one to get Formula F. He could get his hands on a clunk like Yenom, maybe, but he'd never have access to a hot item like Formula F. A question of credibility, you see. Lacey would likely suspect Dom's role as a double agent if Dom—an outsider—were to come up readily with data on Formula F, a military product so secret it was hidden from all but pertinent eyes. So the FBI needed a Hooten employee—an insider—to serve as a patsy.

"Andy suggested me. Andy knew that I was dissatisfied with my lot at Hooten and that my wife had drawn the line on leaving town. He told the FBI that if Dom were to tell Lacey that I was frustrated at home and office, Lacey might move more quickly to enlist me as his route to Formula F. Yes, yes, yes, agreed the FBI, and furthermore, thanks to his noble CIC background, good ole Dexter ain't likely to lose his cool. What? said Andy; you mean you aren't going to tell old Dex about your scheme and his role in it? Heck no, said the FBI—he'll be much more convincing if we keep him in the dark. Andy was unhappy about this

dirty trick and went along with it only under protest.

"To get me launched, the FBI asked Mr. Hooten to assign me to a magazine article on industrial espionage. This was sure to be gossiped about, because I'd be moving widely about the company asking vaguely suspicious questions. Lacey would certainly hear the gossip which, when coupled with my known disgruntlement, would augment my appeal as a potential spy."

I paused. Then: "It was a good idea, too, except for one big fault. Everybody—including me—had underestimated my boredom and thirst for some kind of excitement. To everybody's surprise and chagrin, I began to uncork an old CIC caper to suck in the spy on my own."

There was a long moment of silence while they all thought thoughts and I checked my watch again. Brewster stirred and cleared his throat, and Hooten and Morris and Kopeck traded glances of silent sharing.

"I'll admit," Brewster said, "you were pretty cute the way you set yourself up. Classic play. But as busy as you were on your own scheme, how did you tumble to ours?"

"Slowly, I'm afraid. And in itty-bitty pieces. I began to get suspicious because of all the unanswered questions. Questions like who was tailing me, and why? Lacey would have no reason to tail me—he was setting me up for a murder rap and knew I was not about to run for the cops. Another question: What had Mr. Hooten himself said that kept bugging me? Another question: Why was Dom so worried about my welfare—fun-loving kid like him, who ordinarily would be sure to see all the laughs in my dating bawds and things? Anoth-

er question: Why had Andy Morris failed to take legal action against Armbruster to force a court decision on Yenom's proprietary rights? Another question: Who would take a shot at me and deliberately miss? Another question: Why was Mr. Hooten so anxious to fire me and turn me at once into a disgruntled ex-employee—yet, in the face of this, give me time to finish a magazine article? He hadn't hesitated in Harry Steiger's case; he fired Harry summarily for a transgression no greater than my own. How come, unless Mr. Hooten needed me under company control for at least two more weeks?"

I let the questions hang in the great expanse of my office, but nobody offered a comment.

"So I decided to blast out some answers," I said. "For openers, I kidnapped Claude Lacey and faked his death in an auto wreck. My plan was to wait and see who else might approach me about Formula F. With Lacey out of the picture, it was reasonable to expect that somebody—Lacey's boss, most likely—would move into the open and make me a proposition. But right about here I began to see the light. Mr. Hooten had claimed he didn't know, or care to know, Bean One about espionage. Yet in assigning me to this job he'd used the word 'penetrate'—a word that is very definitely spy-trade lingo and which he must have heard from somebody in the spy trade. Well, why would Old Balls be consorting with somebody in the spy trade? I asked me. Because, by gum, he'd been asked by somebody in the spy trade to set up dear little old Paul Dexter as a decoy, a dust-stirrer, so to speak. Well, what somebody in what spy trade? How about the FBI, which has a penchant for ringing neighborhood doorbells and asking about folks?" I

paused again, unable to restrain another peek at my watch.

"Go on," Brewster said coolly.

"When Bruce Peebles intercepted two men trying to sneak into Lacey's apartment within minutes of my kidnapping of Lacey, it occurred to me that the FBI was not really after Lacey but for some time had been trying to identify Lacey's boss. If so, this meant that the FBI had long been planning to do what I had just done on my own, which was to remove Lacey from the scene and see who might contact me in his place. By way of further confirmation, I found that somebody very professional—probably the FBI—had wired up this spacious office to monitor all my conversations. And as for the mysterious gunshot, it occurred to me that Andy, who liked my family and wanted to preserve it, had anguished privately over the hole I was digging myself into and decided privately to scare me into immobility by firing a shot at me from his souvenir Luger."

Brewster shifted the knot in his sling and said, "Then why didn't you stay immobilized? And why did you trick us by making a call to Koster that led us to think you were going to raid the Hooten office building?"

I shrugged. "Professional pride, I guess. I wanted to wrap up this caper myself. You people had been giving me a hard time. I wanted to give you the shaft. Tit for darn-old tat, as they say in the U.S. Marines."

"All right," Andy said. "So then what?"

"By this time none of you had the slightest idea as to what the hell I was up to. I'd gone completely beyond your control. I got you all further confused and pinned down on a stakeout of this building by

faking my plans into the bugs you planted here. Then, instead of raiding this office building, I went to Baltimore for a raid on Armbruster. Before I left, though, I had the chance to answer a key question: Who was following me in the Chrysler, and why? I made a call on the girly-service office on Hefflefinger's third floor. I pumped the guard there and he convinced me that Mr. Brewster was a petty blackmailer. It wasn't until I had a chance to sort things out in the hospital yesterday that I recognized my stupidity for having failed to hear the line the guard had muffed."

"What line?" Brewster put in.

"The guard told me that you were going to blackmail me after hearing I was in the mood for a dame. That was impossible. You were tailing me in the library and in your Chrysler *before* I'd even *decided* to approach Dom about getting me a girl friend. That meant you were aware of what I was up to from the very beginning. That meant you must be FBI."

Brewster nodded thoughtfully. "If I'd been in the girly-service office when you made your call, I'd have told you the whole story. But Frank McGivin—he's the guard you put in the hospital, by the way—was undecided what to say to you. So he stuck with our basic cover story. He got some lumps as a result."

Andy broke in. "So what did you do in Baltimore?"

"I peeked at Armbruster's file on Yenom and found I'd been guessing right. In the file it said that for purposes of top secret government security, Armbruster was—under a license signed by Balsley Hooten—permitted to manufacture and sell such a competing product, should it care to. I

had suspected, and confirmed by my sneak raid, that Armbruster would protect itself with such a document in case of misunderstandings now or in the future."

Brewster said, "And once all your suspicions concerning the FBI and its collaboration with Mr. Hooten and Armbruster had been thoroughly nailed down as fact, you were—only then—prepared to sit tight and wait for Lacey's boss to appear. Right?"

"Right. And appear he did. He appeared at the most awkward possible time, did Alexander T. Fitch. Alexander T. Fitch—backed up by Lacey, who had broken out of my cage to spread the alarm. But, thanks to my hard-nosed determination to show you guys how smart I was, I'd gotten myself into a real jam. Fitch came out from under his rock with plans to kill me at the very time none of you knew where I was or what trouble I was in. I'd have come a cropper if I hadn't run to Hefflefinger's to get help from Bruce Peebles." I stared at Brewster. "How long have you had your undercover office at Hefflefinger's, by the way?"

"Since before Christmas," Brewster said. "Since we'd set up our plan to nail Lacey and his boss."

"Stokes doesn't know you're FBI?"

"No, he and the bartender have thoroughly swallowed our girlie-racket cover."

"Speaking of girls," I said, "why was my wife in your office Friday night?"

"She'd taken to following you around. She was bound to cause trouble if we didn't take her partly into our confidence. So Andy and I told her you were doing a job for us. When we lost track of you, she started to come unglued. So we brought her

down to the office to—how do the writers put it—maintain the vigil?”

I nodded, then regarded Andy. “It was you I socked in the hall that night, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. You damn near put my eye out.”

To Brewster I said, “I’m sorry Carl shot you.”

He winked. “I’ve been shot before.”

There was another long pause. Then Brewster said, “So that wraps it up, eh? With Lacey and Fitch dead the case is closed.”

I looked at him and gave him an even bigger wink. “Uh-uh. We haven’t got the real spy yet.”

Balsley Hooten snorted. “I thought you said Fitch, as Lacey’s boss, was the real spy.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t. Let me put it this way: Why would the FBI be so thoroughly hotted up over the mere theft of a workaday industrial product when straight litigation would have sufficed to resolve the matter? Mainly if there was a national security aspect to the theft, right? Right. So that means that Lacey reported to Fitch, sure enough, and they sold stolen industrial secrets to fly-by-night companies, sure enough. But Fitch must also have been reporting to somebody else—somebody whose spying was giving the FBI fits. Somebody, perhaps, who was the agent of a foreign power and who was sifting Fitch’s acquisitions and forwarding those with national defense implications to said foreign power.”

Brewster blinked, then half grinned. “Say, that’s far out, that is. But what has convinced you of this?”

I said, “I only suspected it until I saw the hoked-up story the newspaper ran Saturday morning. Somebody—most probably you, Mr. Brewster—had gone to a lot of trouble to see that Carl

Koster was branded the baddie and that my name was kept out of the story altogether."

"And so?" Brewster said.

"And so that meant you didn't want it revealed that I had been in that car or had participated in the shooting and subsequent chase. You talked the local police into giving the press a hoked-up version of Friday night's excitement. Why did you do this? Because your case wasn't closed yet. You still needed me."

"For what, Mr. Dexter?"

And right here my phone burped. And right here it was 10 A.M. on the nose. And right here I felt a kind of glee. I held up a finger and, with the other hand, reached for the phone. "Excuse me, gents. I think this will answer Mr. Brewster's question."

I punched the button that put my phone on conference speaker and then I raised the receiver. "Dexter speaking."

"Hello. Mr. Dexter?" The jolly voice boomed around the room.

"Yes; who's calling?"

"Johnny Carson. You know—down at the missile center?"

"Oh, yes, sir. How are you?"

"Fine. But completely devastated by the news about good old Al Fitch. Terrible thing. We were with him just last Wednesday, weren't we? Terrible. Just terrible."

"He was a great guy. I'll miss him."

"Say, what I called about: I wonder if you'll have lunch with me some day this week."

"Well—"

"I'd sure appreciate it. You see, I was working on a little thing with Fitch—a publicity program—and now that he's passed away, I'm left high and

dry. I've got this little publicity thing hanging right in the air. And I need a good man—a man located in Hootenville who has a publications background and all—to help me out. You seem to be just the guy—Fitch spoke very highly of you and your skills and was anxious for me to meet you—and I'd like to tell you about it and show you some candid pictures Fitch got of you recently. There's dough in it for you, incidentally. I don't expect guys to help me for nothing. And a family type like you can always use a little extra now and then, eh? Ha-ha."

"Boy, I'll say," I said, looking at Balsley Hooten. "I'd do anything for money, believe me."

"Well, then, how about meeting me at the Hooten Hotel at noon on Wednesday? Can you make it?"

"Sure. It'll be fun. It's always fun to talk about money."

"Swell. I'll see you then. O.K.?"

"Sure thing."

"Well, then—so long."

"Good-bye, Mr. Carson."

I hung up, took a deep breath, and feeling I might burst with pride in my 45-year-old, out-dated, run-down, and generally contemptible self, I stared across the vast room into the man's eyes.

I said, "Well, Mr. Brewster, what's your pleasure?"

CHAPTER 29

I decided to take the rest of the day off, and so Andy drove me home at noon. He hadn't said much on the way, seeming to concentrate on his driving. But when he pulled up in front of the house, he gave me a level lawyer's gaze and said, "Know something?"

"What?"

"You're one hell of a guy."

I shook my head. "I'm a big show-off. I made an ass of myself and made a lot of trouble for a lot of nice people. All in the name of boredom."

"Maybe," he said. "But you're a clever ass."

"I'm a little lucky. For instance: If I hadn't been lucky Fitch would have called Carson right away to tell him I was a double agent. But he was too sore and preoccupied with vengeance against me, and so he didn't. And so I was lucky."

I opened the door and climbed out of the Wag-oneer. "Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"I really appreciate your shooting at me. It was the friendliest thing any man has ever done to me."

"A pleasure, buddy-boy. Call me when you've made up your mind, hear?"

"Sure."

He drove off, and I stood for a moment to admire my home. In the bright sunlight, and under the high blue and the cream-puff clouds, it gleamed white and amiable. Behind those windows and under that roof—amid the sagging sofas and the Boston rockers and dry sinks and trestle tables and the pots and pans and friendly smells and creaking sounds in the walls—was where I lived. There was a woman in there. A woman who had helped me make children who would soon be people. She was I and I was she. We. Our home. Us. Ours.

I went in the side door, and she was in the kitchen, fussing at the stove.

I put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Hi."

"Hi. I knew you'd be home early."

"What's for lunch?"

"Macaroni and cheese casserole. Hungry?"

"Mm-hm." I hung my coat and hat in the closet, then went to the nook and sat down and stared into the backyard. Lots of work to be done out there.

Peg served and sat down across the table from me. The sunlight was all around her, a yellowness that shone in her hair and gave her eyes and faint smile that other-world glow of a Renoir.

"So," she said. "You're home."

"Yep."

"I love you. You know that?"

"Yep."

"I'm going to be a better wife."

"I'm satisfied."

"You haven't seen anything yet."

I took a forkful of macaroni and winked at her. She watched me for a time, then peered thoughtfully at the distant, sunwashed hills.

"So what do you have to tell me?" she asked eventually.

"What do I have to tell you," I murmured, filled with an emotion I couldn't name. "I have this to tell you: I am deeply, honestly, indescribably sorry that I have given you more trouble and worry after all those years of trouble and worry. And this: I've been a self-centered, addlepated smart aleck who has elected to see you as an adversary instead of the true friend you are. And this: I want to be your lover again and help you collect antiques and things like that."

"I've waited a long time to hear you say that."

"I was too busy making wisecracks to say it."

"But that's not what I meant when I asked what do you have to tell me."

"What did you meant?"

"I meant what happened at the office today?"

I dabbed a bit with my napkin and rested back in my chair. I said, "The FBI has found a spy. He's a government official located at an Army base down in Maryland. All that hullabaloo Friday night canceled out an industrial espionage ring he had hired to steal a top secret Hooten formula he wants to send to his government abroad. He can't get at the secret from his position at the Army base, what with all the security measures in effect

down there, so he's been trying to get it from the Hooten end. And—"

"And now," she broke in, "J. Edgar Hoover wants you to play along, pretending to cooperate with the spy but in reality giving him false information. Right?"

"That's right."

"And you want me to say it's all right. Right?"

I reached across the table and put my hand on hers. "No. I want you to say what you mean. Not what you think I want to hear. You don't know what I want to hear."

She hesitated, lonely and frightened. Then: "Why doesn't the FBI simply arrest that creep down at the Army base? Why do they always have to fiddle and faddle around and get people hurt and miserable and scared?"

"They can arrest him any time they choose to. But they'd prefer to learn who the spy's boss is."

"And the boss's boss, and the boss's boss's boss. On and on," she said bitterly.

"It's our country, Peg."

"Ha. And so I'm supposed to lend my husband to some Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., to play with and maybe get killed?"

"No," I said in a tone meant to calm her. "You're not expected to at all. And I've told the FBI that if you don't want me to do it, I won't. That's the God's truth."

"Big deal. I bet they were impressed with that, all right."

"As a matter of fact they were. They said you and I have long since done our part, and if we don't want to carry on, they'll find another way."

She looked straight into my eyes. "What do you want, Dex?"

"I'm not going to say until I hear what you want. And to prove my lack of bias, I'll tell you something. I have a date for lunch in Wilmington tomorrow. Conklin Industries has a job opening, and I'm a candidate. They want to talk to me about it. If you want me to buck for it, I will. On the other hand, Hooten has promoted me to LSD's job. If you want me to stay here, I will. If you want me to stay here and tell the FBI to forget it, I will. If you want me to stay here and collaborate with the FBI, I will. What's your choice?"

She came right out with it, her voice hushed and deliberate. "I don't want any choice. Any husband of mine makes his own decisions. I just want to be your wife and be around when you need me, wherever you need me. You decide and I go along. That's the way it's going to be."

I said, "That's what I wanted you to say."

Pushing back from the table, I stood up, stretched, and lifted the phone receiver to dial Brewster's girly-service number. While the ringing sounded crisp and official at the other end, I turned toward her.

"The FBI has asked me to ask you something."

"Well?" She was peering at the hills again.

"They want you to promise to let us handle the case. No more following me, no more hand-to-hand combat with purses. O.K.?"

"You tell the FBI to go to hell. If they want to borrow my husband, they get him on my terms and my terms only. And I'll bash my purse against any head I want to bash."

I laughed.

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